Deadly
Alliance

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A Baldur's Gate 3 Zine

@BG3Zine

Deadly Alliance is an unofficial, fanmade project and is not affiliated with Larian Studios.

Dear Reader,

Baldur's Gate 3 has taken so many of us on a slew of fantastical, branching journeys that all culminate to our final adventures in the city of Baldur's Gate. In a similar vein, our team has banded together from different parts of the world all to create Deadly Alliance, a zine filled with illustrations and stories that celebrate the characters we've met within the Forgotten Realms.

Thank you so much for downloading and reading this zine, a project that our entire contributor and moderator team has worked so hard on. To all the journeys that have yet to be taken and to the stories that have yet to be told, cheers!

With many thanks,
The Deadly Alliance Moderator Team

Misery Moon

Written by Nay

TAGS | General Audiences Rating, F/F, Alfira/Lakrissa, Alfira, Lakrissa, Fluff, Hurt/Comfort, Trauma, Survivor's Guilt

Her fingers quiver in the moonlight.

The bard raises her hand in the air, watching them tremble ever so slightly. Bending and flexing them, in an attempt to regain control over her own body.

It is not a conscious decision. Her body moves without her mind telling it to. She clenches her hand into a fist, trying to hold her fingers down and stop them from shivering, but still, she feels her pulse reverberating against her palm.

The light is incandescent as it passes through her fingers. Once again unfurling them against the stars, counting the constellations caught between them. As if she is playing a melody with Selûne herself, pulling on the strings of the night.

It's been happening for a while, the tremble that won't leave her hands. Blooming in her palm every so often, mostly when she craves stillness. Ever since her life has turned into one of escape. Every time her feet are allowed to rest, something new jumps out of the bushes.

At first, it was shock that took over her whole body.

Inability to rest. Voices constantly in her head. Dread that follows when there is silence. Her heart never calms, and even in sleep, she feels like a prisoner in her mind. The faces of those who have perished on their travels always come to her as she lays awake at night, reminders of how she feels as though she brings nothing to a battle and yet guilty for being

one that is spared.

Sometimes Elturel feels like a memory that isn't even hers. As if it were just stories she had heard from others, taking them on as her own and placing herself in their lives. And every moment since then has been a blur, tragedies one after another following her as if this is all her life will be for the rest of eternity.

What else is she meant to think if all she has seen is death?

And now, even music is no escape.

All that's left is this tremble as proof. Her middle finger quivers without her say.

She tucks her hands away, sitting on them for a few moments until she can trust them again.

The thought dawns on her. What is she, if not a musician? A scholar of the arts. A lover of song. Without her hands cooperating with her, and a voice that is now constantly drenched in her fears, she knows not what she is meant for.

But tonight is quiet. And she has not been allowed to enjoy quiet in a tenday.

Her lute feels heavy in her lap as she sits on a bedrock against the shoreline, hoping to find music in herself once again.

A finger pulls on a string, testing its tautness. The note rings in her ear, bouncing off of the rocks. Dull as it hits the water. But still, it puts a smile on her face, as if calling on a familiar friend. Seeing how they have been faring in the time they have been apart. Her voice sings it back, a note she doesn't find too hard to place.

Her voice is rough. She has not played it properly in so long that it has become rusty.

Still, she has been trying.

Trying for Lihala, trying for the other tieflings she travels with, trying for herself.

Music has always been her escape. Her love. Her light. And now when she wants nothing else but to hold it to her heart; it flutters away, intangible as she attempts to grasp it. Her eyebrows furrow in her frustrations, fingers now to her temple as she attempts to press them into comfort, to no avail.

She wonders what Lihala must think, as she gazes out onto the water that splashes gently back to the shore. If her teacher looks at her now with pity and disdain. The bard thinks she is not worthy of any other emotions, not when her fingers can't settle for even just long enough for her to pluck the proper notes.

She thinks that all she needs is a song. The right words, the right notes, the right rhyme. Maybe then everything will settle, maybe then everything will fall back to normal.

"Alfira."

The voice sends a shiver down her spine.

Larikssa pokes her head from behind the rock formation. The bard never knew that her own name could sound like music. As if she could pluck out the exact notes from the air and play them over and over again on her lute.

The ranger squats down to Alfira's level, tilting her head to try and find the bard's eyes hidden behind fingers. Her hand reaches out, tucking strands of purple hair behind Alfira's ears, coaxing her to let her in.

Yellow eyes peek through her fingers, meeting Lakrissa's with a raise of an eyebrow and a frustrated groan from her lips. A thumb presses gently against the space between Alfira's knitted eyebrows.

"You're thinking too hard again."

"I'm not thinking enough if I can't even–" Her sigh is so heavy that it feels as though she's letting go of a weight on her chest. She has expressed the sentiment before, it isn't anything new to Lakrissa's ears.

The hands caressing her cheeks are warm. Pushing Alfira's hands

out of her own face and replacing them with forgiving ones. The bard's eyes close almost on instinct, holding the feeling in her chest for as long as possible. Digging her skin deeper into Larikssa's palm.

"You're too hard on yourself."

"Not hard enough." She does not want to accept it. "I didn't do anything. I should've done something. I should've-"

She doesn't realise the tear is falling down her face until Lakrissa's thumb stops it from meeting her chin.

Lips planted on its trail. Then mirrored on her opposite cheek. A kiss does not come to her lips, but instead hovers above them, waiting for the bard to agree to her wants.

Alfira almost feels guilty. To indulge herself in so much love.

Why is she allowed love, when others are only granted suffering.

"We were just," The words come in something less than a whisper. "Living our lives. Why are we all being punished for that?"

It is then that Lakrissa pulls Alfira into her arms. The only place they can call home. The only warmth they are granted. They both want to stay in it forever.

"I'm just a musician. That's all I am." She breaths into the ranger's shoulder. "If I had the power to plunge a city into Avernus I don't think I'd be sulking around, unsuccessfully writing a song."

A kiss saves them both. From thoughts too harsh and judgments that are self-inflicted. The guilt is not something either of them can erase, as it carves itself into their skin. When they part, the bard is met with Lakrissa's flame filled eyes. So soft and comforting, they allow her to sit in the moment and let go of her own thoughts.

Larikssa is waiting for her, wherever her mind may be, she will always be waiting for her. A blush colours her cheeks, to be loved is to experience the scope of art.

Alfira's fingers reach out, still against the ranger's lips as she

attempts to feel the remnants of their kiss. It is her that stops the quivering, fingers motionless against her skin.

Maybe she has been looking too far. Inspiration stalls in her body but someone may be able to pull it out of her.

"Write a song for me." Lakrissa whispers against Alfira's fingers. Soft lips on calloused fingers, the gentleness of her voice suggests that she is not joking as she so often does. But she ends her thought with a teasing smile, "Let me be your muse."

The ranger never asks for anything from her love. Only for them to share their lives together. And thus the words are almost a shock to the bard's system, blinking back in surprise as Lakrissa finally decides on a request.

"Just for me." Her hand comes up to Alfira's fingers, keeping them on her lips and pressing them into her words. Not allowing the bard to interrupt her request with a complaint. "Think of nothing but us."

Soft lips against cold fingertips.

"Not of Elturel. Not of Lihala. Not of anyone else here with us." A kiss on her fingertips. "Just us."

Alfira will do anything for her. Lakrissa has done so much already, the simple ask feels too small of a task. She could ask for her life and Alfira would not hesitate.

"Alright." She accepts.

Her fingers wrap around Lakrissa's chin, holding her without hesitation. Her fingers do not falter on her lover's skin, like they were always meant to be there. Alfira pulls her lips into a kiss, and she holds onto Lakrissa knowing she is the only thing the bard is scared to lose.

"Just for you."

Her fingers are still.

LIUMS

Don't You Dare Forget the Sun

Written by spotty_lion

TAGS | No Content Rating Given, Post-Game, Astarion Ancunin, Spawn Astarion, Five Stages of Grief, Self-Destructive Behavior, No Dialogue

DENIAL

Astarion had a feeling that he was the only one in their party of six that *missed* the tadpole. To a degree, at least – he would be the first to admit that the looming threat of his jaw splitting and his skin melting from his bones was something he didn't think he would *ever* miss.

But the tadpole had benefitted him. It had buffered his usual weaknesses as a vampire spawn, freeing him from the limitations of his condition.

He had been able to stand in the *sun.* The glorious, beautiful sun. Two *centuries* without seeing the sun and the way that it bathed the world around him in colour and light and *joy.* He had forgotten just how bright the world could be, after so long of cowering in the darkness. He had forgotten a lot in the last two hundred years.

Warmth on his chilled skin, a golden hue rippling over his pallid tone, lighting him up as if he deserved to stand under the same sky as the heroes he had heard so much about. To him, the sun was the embodiment of all that was good and honest, righteous and holy.

All the things that he was *not* and never would be.

It hurt, now, to think of that victorious day when they had stood on the dock and watched the Netherbrain crumple into the Chionthar below.

The emptiness in his head, the *silence,* had been jarring, but welcomed, after so long of constant *buzzing.* Finally, there was *peace.*

And then there was the burning.

And then there was his huddled, shaking form crammed against the harsh wooden surface of the crates that were providing shade for him. His skin was tingling, *stinging,* as if it would dissolve off of his very bones. He wondered if it would. He wondered if he would care.

Astarion didn't move from his shaded spot for hours. And in the end, he was too numb to even feel the ache in his limbs as he unfurled them from their coiled-up position. That numbness followed on his heels.

It affected his ability to accept the truth for several days after that, reaching out to his lost love as it streaked through the slits in the curtains, only for it to bite him and send him scurrying backwards into the arms of his oldest and cruellest friend – the darkness.

ANGER

The anger didn't take long to set in after the denial had lifted itself from Astarion's cold eyes. He had made the decision to slink down into the Underdark, to follow his siblings and the seven thousand of their charges, all of whom were supposed to be sacrifices.

His sacrifices.

The Rite of Profane Ascension. The Black Mass. It had a few names – though none would grace the history books alongside the names of the Heroes of Baldur's Gate – but no matter what it was called, it would have granted Astarion the ability to walk in the sun once the tadpole in his brain had shrivelled and rotted.

Astarion found himself seething at the sight of them all. How could they have any idea of what he had lost in preserving their lives? They had likely forgotten the feeling of the sun, just as he had, but they had not been teased with the rekindling of that memory in recent months. They went on, not knowing the gentle hands of those rays of light, or the warmth that could make undead beasts feel *alive* again.

They would never know *his* pain.

The spawn soon grew to resent him, what with his abhorrent behaviour and sharp tongue. He knew that he did not give them any sort of figure to look up to, but he found that he couldn't bring himself to care.

If they got in his way, he would snap at them.

If they asked too many questions of him, he would bare his fangs and push them away.

Astarion could sometimes be found at the centre of many fights, a misspoken word or an ill-placed snide comment of his surliness setting him off like a lit match next to a barrel of runepowder. His claws were stained in blood, stealing what little lay beneath the spawns' skin, and he wore it as a mark of pride, of status.

If they left him alone, he would grant them the same courtesy.

He watched them often, simmering in his righteous, grieving fury. And it infuriated him that he did not regret the fact that seven thousand undead lives persisted outside of Cazador's dungeon.

He did not regret sparing them. And that made him the angriest.

BARGAINING

There was a part of him that knew this was a terrible and foolish idea. There was a part of him that knew this wouldn't work the way he wanted it to. There was a part of him that sneered at his own stupidity and scoffed at his mind that stubbornly clung to hope.

And yet when Astarion Ancunín got an idea in his head, it was very difficult to get it back out.

He had started to bargain with the sun itself.

If he could only train himself to last under the light, he thought, if he could learn to withstand the burning, the crisping, the flaking, the *pain,* then he would be just fine. He could have the sun again, even if it

caused him more damage than when the tadpole had still resided in his brain.

Suffice to say, he had paid for it, and badly.

He had been staying in the Elfsong tavern – what would have been an expensive choice, but the bartender recognised him from just weeks ago and allowed him use of the party's old room. At first, he decided to try his bargain through the window first, not able to stand the idea of the shame that would have coiled in his belly if the entirety of the city was looking at him and his burning skin.

Astarion started with his hand. Such a small part of the body, such a small sacrifice. He had given more of himself for much less, after all. It was even his left hand, just to make sure that if he lost more than he was prepared for, it wouldn't be his dominant hand out of commission.

Time and time again he tried, but to no avail. His skin peeled and flaked until he swore he could see the bone, but he couldn't stand it for long enough.

He wasn't even able to progress to casting his wrist in the light, coward that he was. He had survived two centuries of torture, and yet he wasn't able to bear two *minutes* of his hand cast in the golden light of his beloved sun? Once, it would have sent him in a rage, but now it only sent him into a deep and pitiful downwards spiral.

DEPRESSION

After his bargain fell through and the sun persisted in clawing through his skin, Astarion retreated to his bed. He buried himself underneath as many blankets as he could find, as if that alone would give him back the warmth that he so desperately craved.

He didn't move for days.

What was the point?

He hoped he would wither away, cocooned in his pretend sunlight.

The lack of blood in his veins finally claiming his life as he had always hoped it would when he was trapped in the walls of Cazador's palace.

Without the sun, he was just another vampire, just another creature of the night, just another monster. He was worthless, his master had always said, and perhaps there was some truth in that after all. Perhaps he *wasn't* more than what Cazador had made him to be. Perhaps he would have served better as a sacrifice.

It was when his thoughts coalesced like this that he decided to get back up. No longer content to view himself as second rate, he decided to pull back the covers, to shed his faux sunlight, and he decided to *change.*

ACCEPTANCE

At first, Astarion had floundered for exactly *how* he wanted to change. How could he flourish from the withered rose he had become?

It was a fluttering "Wanted" poster that caught his eye and mind at once.

Astarion Ancunín could dip his toes into the realms of heroes and adventurers. So what if his smile was just a little sharper than others? His daggers would do the talking, after all.

And as it happened, murder wasn't frowned upon depending on the corpse.

Through his hacking and slashing through various bounties that landed in his lap, Astarion discovered a whole new world under the covers of darkness. He found that the dark was beautiful in its own way, no longer was the moon witness to his shame as he arched his back against any old drunk who would have him. Now, the stars were witness to his *pride* as he melted into the shadows that the dark provided him, as he become one with the nighttime and its haunting wildlife, a predator that hunted for the good of the city, though its inhabitants might not know him by name or face.

He was given a *purpose* again, and perhaps that had been what he had been lacking this whole time.

He could live without the sun, he realised. It wasn't the end of the world. He missed it still, he thought that he always would. But if creatures of the sun could return to the dark, then perhaps one day, a creature of the dark could return to the light.

After all, what was life without a little bit of hope?

Allow None to be Your Equal:

Written by Aria Achilles Aphoridisa

TAGS | No Content Rating Given, Pre-Game, Cazador Szarr, Godey, Vellioth the Martinet, Spawn Cazador, Emotional Abuse, Blood/Bruises/Cuts, Character Death, Death, Emotional Manipulation, Kidnapping, Non-Consensual Blood Drinking, Pleading, Rope, Torture

Cazador awoke with fear coursing through every cell in his body, though he did not yet know why he was so terrified. He shook his head to lessen the disorientation he was suffering as a result of a pounding headache and then began to take in his surroundings.

He was in the dungeon. Shackles restrained him to the wall, and each inhale brought with it the scent of decay. Cazador gagged but did his best to continue his investigations despite his rising nausea.

It was not long before he saw two figures across the room. One was kneeling on the ground with the other standing directly behind him, a hand on the kneeling man's left shoulder. As soon as Cazador saw them, his blood ran cold for two very different reasons.

The first was that Cazador recognized the kneeling figure. It was the young mortal man he had befriended during his time as a vampire spawn. They had met at a gala event and had quickly become friends. Cazador was forbidden from maintaining any interpersonal relationships, meaning that most of the time they shared was spent sneaking around and praying they would not be discovered. Yet that did nothing to weaken their bond, with Cazador stealing away at every possible opportunity to spend time with his friend. His best friend. The only person Cazador felt he could confide in…

Who thanks to him was now captive in the Palace dungeon.

His friend was bound, blindfolded, and terrified. Streams of tears flowed steadily down his face, and soft whimpers were leaving his chapped lips; the sight broke Cazador's heart.

The second reason was that the man standing behind his friend was none other than Vellioth the Martinet. Lord of the House, ruling power in Baldur's Gate… and his Master. Much to Cazador's horror, Vellioth wore an expression of amusement rather than anger. He had a wicked grin on his face; excitement in his eyes; and his fangs on full display.

"I was wondering when you would notice us," Vellioth chuckled. He leaned down to the captive figure, his tongue lapping in a snake-like motion at the man's ear before whispering: "Your friend has finally awoken, little mortal. Why don't you say hello?" The mortal let out a surprised gasp and began to frantically crane his head in an attempt to ascertain Cazador's location.

"C-Cazador?! Are you there?!" his friend called between wild sobs. "Please! Help me. Do something, please. Don't let him hurt me!" pleaded his friend. Cazador turned his gaze towards Vellioth, a desperate expression on his face.

"Master, I'm sorry. I know I went against your rules. I swear that I will never misbehave again. Just let him go. Please, Master, do not harm him," babbled Cazador, though he knew his words would fall upon uncaring ears. Vellioth tilted his head to the side with a pout.

"Pleading already? Pathetic. Although I suppose that I should expect nothing but weakness from you, boy. Weakness and mistakes. I mean, honestly! Did you think me so foolish as to not notice that you have been spending time with your little mortal pet?" Vellioth inquired.

"N-No, of course not, Master," stammered Cazador.

"And yet your actions suggest otherwise? How many times did you meet him? I honestly stopped counting after the first two weeks or

so," Vellioth said, and his lips curled into a smirk upon seeing Cazador's horror at the statement.

"Weeks?!" Cazador thought to himself. *"He knew for weeks, yet said nothing?!"*

"All that trouble you went through. And for what?" Vellioth questioned, moving now to kneel to the left of Cazador's friend. He then gripped the man's face, digging his nails into the mortal's cheeks. "You and I both know that there is nothing that your mortal plaything here can provide for you that I could not provide tenfold."

At these words, something within Cazador snapped. He stared at Vellioth with rage and defiance burying in his crimson eyes, and his fangs bared.

"He is not a plaything – he is my friend!" shouted Cazador with a snarl. "And he provides me with so much more than you ever could! He has shown me kindness, compassion, and warmth; all of which that you are incapable of!"

There was a glorious moment where Vellioth wore an expression of genuine surprise, but then, almost as quickly as it had appeared, the look shifted to one of amusement. Vellioth threw his head back, howling with laughter.

"Oh, my treasure! What a show that was!" he cackled. "How long has it been since you've had a tantrum like that? Many a moon, that is for certain!" Vellioth mocked, earning a growl from Cazador. "Still, your outburst only proves that you need a reminder of my lessons," Vellioth reprimanded. He then tilted the mortal's head to the side, exposing his neck to the vampire lord.

"Lesson #1: always dominate. Allow none to be your equal," Vellioth chided. Cazador heard many things in his tone. Excitement; pleasure; and worse of all… Gods, worse of all: hunger. It was only at the sound of this atrocious hunger that Cazador fully comprehended what Vellioth

intended as his punishment. His eyes widened at the realization, and he opened his mouth, meaning to do something. Plead? Protest? Cry out? He did not know what, but in the end, it did not matter, for before any sound could be made…

Vellioth bit into Cazador's friend, fangs piercing the delicate skin of his neck with ease.

Cazador hears his friend's shrieks of agony - along with his frantic pleas for a mercy Cazador knows will not be provided – but his brain barely processes it. It scarcely registers his own voice, yet he knows he is pleading. Screaming and weeping and begging Vellioth to let his friend go. Trying to take the punishment upon himself. His vision blurs with tears and his head swims, but he can still make out the image of his Master feeding, a horrid glee in his expression that suggests to Cazador that he had no intention of stopping anytime soon.

For the first two hours, Cazador shouts, pleads, and desperately attempts to bargain all the while his friend's shrieks of agony fill the room.

Partway into the seventh hour is when his Master appears to grow bored of Cazador's punishment, and finally drains the remaining blood from his friend's shivering form. By this point, both Cazador and his friend have long since fallen silent. Cazador watches as his Master pulls away from the corpse and tilts his head back, a satisfied groan leaving him. His Master then walks over to him, and Cazador does not even have the energy to flinch when his Master presses his blood-stained lips to the shell of his ear.

"Let this serve as a reminder of what will happen should you ever let your foolish heart grow close to another again," his Master whispered as he unlocked Cazador's restraints, leaving the spawn to fall gracelessly to the ground. The vampire lord then stood up, gave a last look at his spawn, and so much as without another word, made his way out of the

dungeon; the heavy doors slamming shut behind him.

Cazador was numb as he dragged himself to where his friend's corpse lay. Careful as he could be - given the violent shaking of his hands – Cazador cradled the man, hands resting on the small of his back so the two were nuzzled together tightly.

He tried to recall the memory of how it felt hugging him. The gentle rising and falling of his chest. His soft breaths hitting Cazador's shoulder. The warmth of his arms as they embraced him. He tried hardest to picture that last bit, for the warmth was what he loved most about their hugs. The first time his friend had hugged him had been the first time in his too-long life that he had felt such warmth. He remembered that he had wept, and even as he cried, his friend's touch never wavered; it had only strengthened.

For a moment, while lost in the memory of that first hug, Cazador felt that warmth once more…

And then, in an instant, it was gone. The illusion had shattered, and it had obliterated Cazador's heart along with it.

Cazador held his friend in a vice-grip, afraid that should his embrace falter for even a second, his friend would fade to nothingness before his very eyes. He was rocking back and forth as he cradled the man, and waterfalls of tears fell from his eyes.

There were a million things Cazador wanted to say in that moment. Countless goodbyes that formed in his mind, but he could voice none of them. For the mere thought of having to say goodbye at all was too much for him to bear.

So instead, Cazador leaned down; kissed his friend softly on the forehead; and whispered five words into his ear:

"I am so sorry, Godey."

Dirge of the Moonmaiden's Daughter

Written by HopeStoryteller

TAGS | General Audiences Rating, Canon Compliant, F/F, Dame Aylin | Nightsong/Isobel, Dame Aylin | Nightsong, Balthazar, Isobel Thorm, Ketheric Thorm, Shadowheart, Angst with a Happy Ending, Major Character Death, Major Character Undeath, Grief/Mourning, Immortality, Nightmares

Of all the things Aylin adores about Isobel, her beloved's laugh never fails to capture her heart all over again. It is Isobel's laugh, distinctly amused at the way that the fireflies dart and dance about after nightfall, that bolsters her spirit now. A full moon shines above them, Selûne's blessing upon their love, and the moonlit night is nearly as beautiful as Isobel herself is.

(Nearly; Aylin will gladly confess her own biases upon the matter if she is asked.)

"Oh, Aylin," Isobel says, giving Aylin's hand in hers a gentle squeeze. "Silly as they are... aren't they beautiful?"

"They are," Aylin agrees, though a part of her cannot tear her gaze away from Isobel's face. "As are you, my love."

Another laugh escapes Isobel—though there's a note of *something* to it that Aylin can't quite identify. "As you continue to inform me, but—Aylin, look!"

Bid by Isobel, she does so. The insects gleam with two kinds of light, the Moonmaiden's silver and their own intrinsic gold. They are plentiful on nights such as these—one of many things that Aylin had no

way of knowing before falling for a mortal.

She knows well that her beloved cannot live forever. But they shall have many happy years ahead of them before that day arrives, and Aylin has no desire to think of such things until their proper time—especially not while they are happy together.

Yet slowly, ever so slowly, the light of the moon begins to dim. Dark clouds encroach upon her mother's light, weakening it, dimming the surroundings. The fireflies, one by one, begin to go out. Something is wrong. Something is *deeply*, deeply wrong.

"Aylin?" Isobel's voice breaks. "Please, look at me."

She looks, though she fears to. Isobel's hand remains in her own, but her beloved no longer sits beside her on the hill. She lies prone—her eyes closed, a bloody gash marring her armor, her silver hair matted with her own blood.

Isobel's hand is limp in Aylin's now. She is not breathing.

"No." A whisper, a mere whisper, is all that Aylin can muster—she wishes nothing more than to not believe her eyes, than to believe this a trick, but she knows it is nothing of the sort. Desperately, hopefully, she checks for a pulse. She finds none.

Aylin screams, the sound stricken with grief and with rage.

The Nightsong awakens.

She is standing when she wakes. It was only a dream. It was only a horrible nightmare, the likes of which the Nightsinger would adore—yet the reality of what happened to her beloved is far, *far* worse.

Isobel is dead. Isobel has been dead for… some time. Aylin cannot be certain how long. Time is never easy for an immortal, or for one as good as outside rather specific circumstances, but she *had* been growing better at keeping track before Isobel…

Before Aylin lost her.

She still isn't certain what *happened*. In the morning, Isobel was alive and well. Full of life and love and laughter.

By nightfall, Isobel was gone.

Ketheric blamed Aylin, as if the act of being longer-lived meant that she would not have wanted to spend as much time as possible with Isobel while she still could. As if Aylin did not love his daughter more than she loved herself.

The most charitable interpretation of his actions is that he needed a scapegoat to not lose himself in his grief, that Aylin made a convenient one. Aylin isn't particularly inclined to be charitable regarding the man who trapped her within the Shadowfell.

He never liked her. But she never *imagined* that he would resort to something such as this.

It has been a very long time since she last saw him. He hadn't been able to look her in the eyes. Balthazar had, but Balthazar had never been an individual she held much trust for. *Balthazar* wasn't the father her beloved held in high regard.

"Isobel would not have wanted this," she told Ketheric then. And for a moment—if only a moment—it appeared as if he might be having second thoughts.

But his gaze hardened again. He hefted his warhammer.

"You have no right to speak of her," spat the man who had even less right to do so.

And Aylin discovered then, for the first time of many, what it was to die.

In other circumstances, it would be easier to grieve. Aylin has known loss before, certainly, but nothing of this magnitude. Her mother

had warned her against growing too close to mortals for precisely this reason, but it has never been the Moonmaiden's way to force her devoted to choose what she would prefer.

A dark part of her heart almost wishes that her mother *had* been more forceful. More insistent that falling in love with Isobel would not end well for either of them. But how could Aylin have known? How could *anyone* have known?

…If she could go back and do it over, if she could change the past… if she *could* prevent herself from falling for Isobel, knowing what pain would come later, she would choose to do it again in a heartbeat. She would treasure what moments she had with Isobel more, *far* more, while she still could.

She cannot be at all *certain* of how much time has passed. But after countless years and decades of nothing, she finds herself wounded once again by Ketheric's stolen immortality. She catches glimpses, sometimes, of what it is he sets himself to now.

Aylin learns, this way, that she has been trapped here for a century. That Ketheric Thorm flaunts his invulnerability like a gaudy bird putting on a display for a mate, and that he has once again forsaken his goddess in favor of something else she cannot hope to comprehend through scattered moments.

(It is in this way she learns that Isobel has been dead for a century.)

In other circumstances, it would be easier to grieve. In these, it is easier to plot. To bide her time, for she has nothing *but* that here in the soul-cage Balthazar crafted for her. If Ketheric has forsworn Shar as easily as he forsook Selûne, then it is doubtful he would want the secret to his immortality to remain in the heart of the Shadowfell.

This time, when Balthazar comes for the Nightsong—if it *is* Balthazar, as Aylin rather doubts she would be so fortunate as to have outlived that nasty man *quite* yet—she will be ready. This time, her grief

will not blind her.

(When it is finally over, when Ketheric at last lies dead… then, and only then, will she be able to *truly* grieve Isobel.)

They arrive. That in itself is a surprise; there is a Sharran initiate among the group, but she is neither alone nor accompanied by other Sharrans. The other surprise is the odd lack of Balthazar, though Aylin will not complain about that.

The Sharran… something is different about her. Aylin grows surer of it as she draws nearer.

Perhaps there is a chance to dissuade her from her fell task. To dissuade her from Shar.

And if Aylin should fail… there will, at least, be someone waiting for her in death.

She succeeds, though not without help from the not-quite-Sharran's companions. For the first time in a century, her mother's power courses through her.

For the first time in a century, she feels something other than pain and rage. She still feels both quite keenly, but the pain can wait to be addressed until *after* she has put an end to Ketheric Thorm once and for all.

The Nightsong is no more. Aylin soars.

Isobel should not be alive. Aylin saw her lifeless body; she carried Isobel home, though there was nothing that could be done now for her beloved, save laying her to rest. However, the most recent god that

Ketheric threw his lot in with was Myrkul, and it seems…

…Myrkul, it seems, was able to do what Selûne could not. What Shar could not. For Ketheric lies dead and his daughter lies in bed with Aylin, looking upon her now with unconcealed concern.

"A nightmare?" Isobel asks—softly, for it *is* a truly ungodly hour of the night.

Aylin can only nod. "I was again imprisoned. And you…"

She cannot bring herself to say it. Not again.

Isobel can, comprehension dawning in her eyes. "I was dead."

Slowly, very slowly, Aylin nods. She cannot meet Isobel's gaze now.

"Aylin? Please, look at me."

She looks. Isobel is still here, irreversibly changed but alive—the one thing Aylin could *never* hold against Ketheric Thorm.

Isobel's hand finds hers. "I am here, Aylin, I promise. So are you."

"So am I," Aylin murmurs.

Isobel offers her a wistful smile, leaning into her touch. Aylin wraps an arm around her. She says nothing.

(However long she has with Isobel now, she intends to cherish every moment of it—every moment of *her*—now and forever.)

NORDENHELM | 202

KAVALEYRE

A Light in the Darkness

Written by SnailorBee

TAGS | General Audiences Rating, No Archive Warnings Apply, Canon Compliant, Dammon, Character Study

As his hammer rains down upon the steel, working it into the shape he's already envisioned in his mind, the sound vibrates through his skull so loud that nothing else could possibly filter through.

When Dammon finally stops to evaluate the blade and mentally declares it good, he drops it into the vat of hot oil, idly listening to the hiss it lets out.

There's a small gathering of tieflings loitering nearby, two men and a woman, discussing with each other with supposedly hushed voices though it travels easily to where Dammon is working. Once he hears what they're discussing, he wishes he had something else he could hammer because he doesn't want to hear it. Can't they go anywhere *else?* Perhaps they're hoping his noise will cover up the majority of their conversation.

"They just can't *do* this to us!" one pink-skinned tiefling woman complains, her voice just shy of a yell. "Dooming us all to die! Damn the druids!"

One of the men huffs, arms crossed. "They showed their true colors. I always knew those druids would be no good. Everyone always hates tieflings, their so-called kindness was bound to run out eventually." He spits on the ground.

Dammon carefully starts going over his stock, even though he has everything memorized. He crouches down to his tiptoes, silently praying

that they won't involve him as the other man vehemently agrees with the first.

"Oi, Dammon!" the woman calls out and he flinches, tail whipping against the ground with his surprise. "What do you think? Isn't it unfair?"

Slowly, he turns towards them, forcing a small smile. "Everyone deals with fear differently. I was happy to call this place home for as long as possible, but my goal has always been to get to Baldur's Gate." He gets to his feet as one of the men scoffs.

"So pragmatic of you, Dammon, like always. You can just say they're treating us like shit."

He thinks of hell, of the worst kind of heat he's ever experienced, so much so that no forge he's ever stood next to since has ever come close. He thinks about how he would have suffered if he'd stayed in that place. He thinks about the nightmares that he knows will never go away.

"There are worse things in life," he answers and turns away.

It doesn't take long for their little group to take their grumblings elsewhere, as he focuses on other tasks that don't make a lot of noise. He's glad to see them go.

It's hard to *disagree* with them, per se. Dammon knows that many of them have families, children, and loved ones to watch over, and getting thrown out so suddenly, with no hope of protection from the dangers lurking right outside their doorstep, sits unpleasantly with many.

However, this isn't their home. The druids took them in and it's within their prerogative to kick them out whenever they want.

Dammon doesn't blame the druids, nor does he blame the tieflings for their anger but he won't spit on their hosts while they are still being housed and fed. And even when they aren't, he isn't the type to curse others for his own misfortune.

He'll just do what he always does, put down his head, and do the

work that needs to be done.

The Last Light Inn lives up to its name.

It's the only speck of light in an otherwise dark landscape.

Dammon thought that fire and brimstone, with heat so scorching it felt like your very skin was melting off your bones, would be the worst kind of fear he'd ever experience.

But this darkness, it's a different sort of terror. It brings with it a chill so cold it feels like it seeps into his very soul, tearing apart his defenses and leaving him barely holding himself together.

He stays next to the forge, letting the flames lick harmlessly against his calloused fingertips, and tries to cling to the small comfort it brings. He barely peeks his head outside of the little corner he sets himself up in. The sky, when he chances a look past the shimmering silver barrier, disturbs him, with its unnatural inky blackness. It feels like something watches him back, silently baring invisible teeth and claws, ready to strike and kill them all.

The days stretch on, amongst that ever swirling darkness.

Nothing has ever prepared him for this. Dammon isn't the only one who is struggling; he's aware of those wandering around the Inn, anxious to get away yet powerless to do so.

It feels like, if they stay here long enough, the darkness will devour them all.

Honestly, Dammon is probably better off than most. He keeps his head down, as he's learned to do all his life, and he does his job. Even here, trapped in a pit of despair, there is a need for weapons, for armor. He is able to sink into his job and ignore the rest, for a time anyway.

Whenever his hammer stills, the whispers that seem to linger in the dark corners that no light manages to chase away resume as if

waiting for him to finish so they can start again. It's like a persistent jabbing at the corner of his mind, chipping away at his defenses.

Telling him that risking the darkness would be better than this.

Dammon never succumbs to the desire, but many others do, and likely get lost out there, in the dark.

When the same adventurers find their way to the Last Light Inn, Dammon is relieved, like so many others. They saved the Grove, perhaps they can do the same here.

Baldur's Gate glimmers in the distance, a goal he's still adamant about reaching. Even if the adventurers manage to save the Inn, Dammon has the feeling there is more at play, a bigger picture that somehow connects all the strange things that have been happening.

He doesn't attempt to puzzle out those mysteries. At the end of the day, he's just a blacksmith, and happy in that role. He's not cut out for grand adventures and saving the world.

Instead, Dammon hopes that when he finally gets to Baldur's Gate, he'll be able to carve out a life for himself there, at peace at last.

The journey to get there has been long and challenging and there's no guarantee that his life will improve once he reaches it. Still, he finds himself longing for it anyway. Hoping for it maybe, despite everything.

A peaceful life, doing what he loves, and doing it well.

It might not be exciting or the kind of life that bards sing stories about, but it suits him just fine.

Many might find it naive of him, to wish for better days amongst the blackness of their current situation. Some might think that things will never get better.

Dammon doesn't let himself get bogged down in that mindset. He's gotten this far because he's trusted his gut and didn't let himself fall into despair. That's all he *could* do, in most situations. And that has carried him pretty far, he'd say.

So he plans to keep striving for what he's been dreaming of for so long, and hope that the next time he sees the sun, it'll shine down on a world at peace.

Shadow of a Doubt

Written by milky.mosaic

TAGS | General Audiences Rating, No Archive Warnings Apply, Gale Dekarios, Astarion Ancunin, Mystra, Rolan, Wyll Ravengard, Angst, Curses, Guilt, Hurt/No Comfort, Magic, Past Relationship(s), The Power of Friendship, Self-Doubt

A cautious smile crept onto Gale's lips as a twinkle slowly flickered to life amidst the preternatural darkness surrounding the shadow core, like tinder catching. The glimmer grew to the size of a candle's flame, then a torch's, continuing to blossom until it had banished the creeping tendrils emanating from the highly concentrated curse. Holding the *daylight* spell in place, Gale counted his breaths as the thundering of his heart did its best to throw him off his rhythm. With practiced hands, he turned the spell inward, twisting it towards the core, hoping to sear its surface like cauterizing a hydra's neck. The rays of light flashed and trembled, but were finally compelled to encompass the horrid sphere. Gale waited, not wanting to let go before his spell could, well, work its magic.

After what felt like days but which his hourglass indicated had been a mere fifteen minutes, Gale relaxed, allowing his concentration to lapse. The spell held, the core now appearing as little more than an oily lump of coal. He stood and watched as the sand in his second glass steadily fell, counting off the hour the spell would last. He could have walked away, had a sip of water, shut his burning, exhausted eyes for just a wink, and had plenty of time to saunter back and observe the results of his labors. But he couldn't stand to tear himself away until he knew if it had worked.

The others - sans Wyll and Karlach, who were cutting a swathe through Avernus - had promised to return after two months' rest to help him in his search for the Crown of Karsus. But there was too much to be done in the meantime for Gale to remain idle, too many worryingly vague happy endings left in their wake. The shadow curse in particular tortured his restless mind. What would they do the next time they ran into a problem that a conveniently allied demi-goddess was not available to brush aside? No, he knew better than any that they could not afford to rest on their laurels.

As the final grain of sand fell, Gale stared intently at the core with bated breath, more focused than he had ever been in all his years of study. Seconds later, the warped shimmer of the *daylight* spell faded, and just as swiftly the wisps of darkness began to grope out from the core once more. Deflated and defeated, Gale turned and walked over to his desk, where he promptly slumped as deeply into his chair as the cushions would allow. It would be back to the drawing board tomorrow.

Massaging his temples, Gale painstakingly replayed in his mind every encounter they'd had with those shades, begging for some clue he had overlooked. They had seen several Harpers fall to the curse's clutches despite all their training and prowess and struggled against the tide of darkness themselves on their march to Moonrise Tower. How then had Rolan - drunk, reckless, and not yet apprenticed - survived the frantic hour it had taken them to find and rescue him from his own idiotic rescue attempt? It was a miracle, and not one Gale was eager to look too deeply into for fear of finding it had been pure luck. He didn't want to think how easily the tiefling wizard might have died out there.

Perhaps Gale's traitorous mind, ambling and grasping for comfort, believed that reliving the moment they had seen Rolan and his siblings reunited would be a comfort. He watched them embrace, heard their laughs and gibes, felt their infectious smiles tugging at the sleeve of

his robe, inviting him to join the revelry. Yet all it accomplished was bringing into sharp focus the vast difference between the people each had dedicated his life to. For indeed, when they had glared one another down on the border of the deepest shadows, each had been convinced that the best possible use of his life would be laying it down in service to another. And yet of the two of them, it was Rolan - the callow, more headstrong and impulsive of the two - whose devotees would have actually cared about his sacrifice. His death would have rent their hearts in twain, as theirs would have his.

As for Gale, just as he was under no illusion that his retrieval of the Crown would do anything more than conclude his dealings with Mystra, he was painfully aware that his death would have given her no more pause than to appreciate a chore well concluded. He had no delusions of winning back her affections nor his place by her side. Nor, he had accepted, did he think he deserved them. The only thing he refused to admit despite all evidence, was that he might not even want these things anymore. It was a frightening possibility. She had been his world, a part of him whether either of them now liked it or not.

Gale gave a bitter laugh, its echo the only sound in the dimly lit midnight of his tower. "Gods. How in the world did I manage to survive my own stupidity?"

'Let me get this straight,' Astarion's catty incredulity echoed through Gale's memory. *'Your goddess tossed you aside the moment a little youthful hubris got out of hand, and instead of telling her to shove her expectations up her component pouch, you agreed to blow yourself up for her ridiculous gambit? For all the other gods' sakes, Gale, the woman couldn't even be bothered to tell you to kill yourself with her own mouth.'*

'Even knowing what's at stake, I must agree with Astarion,' Wyll had chimed in. *'A permanent price is only worth paying on a guaranteed*

return. It would break my heart to see a friend be shorted in such a costly exchange.'

Ah, yes. Whether it was Shadowheart plucking him from a malfunctioning portal or Karlach holding him back bodily from detonating himself against the Netherbrain, it had not been his goddess nor even his own sense that had kept him safe and sane throughout the tadpole's residency, but a ragtag gang of misfits who snarked and argued and forgot to say please and thank you. Who held knives to one anothers' throats, kept life-altering secrets from one another, who raged and roared and bit and snarled. Who licked each others' wounds at the end of the day. Who complimented his cooking. Who got offended when he asked about their past, but then bombarded him for minutes on end with all the lurid details. Who told him he mattered. Who told him he made the difference. Who relied on him. Who helped comfort him when his condition had gnawed at his very soul. Who told him his life meant more to them than an expedient solution to their shared agony.

His friends.

He'd thought dying for Mystra was the highest meaning his life could achieve. But if he'd followed through on her plan then and there, he never would have seen how far the others would come in their own struggles. And he wouldn't have been there to make sure they made it out the other side in one piece too.

Gale shook his head, a tired smile creeping onto his lips. He and Rolan *were* quite alike, weren't they? Both beloved, both struggling to accept that they deserved it, and both terrible at asking for help when they needed it. Even when their lives were at stake, the people that cared for them still had to muscle their way in to save them - half from themselves - kicking and screaming, *convinced* they could handle it without being a burden.

An image painted itself across the canvas of his mind: he and

Rolan, opposite reflections in a mirror, their friends and siblings respectively standing stubborn and stalwart at their sides. It was a merry mural to their triumphs. At least, until another pair of figures began to emerge. Behind each of the wizards loomed another wielder of the Weave, strands of it reaching from their hands to their respective students like the strings of marionettes. Playthings. Tossed about for amusement and fated to be discarded when their broken bodies could dance no more.

Gale started in his chair. He had begun to nod off. And as seemed to be the norm now that he was once again entombed in the solitude of his tower save for Tara's occasional dalliances, the nightmares had promptly come creeping back in.

Drawing a hand over his face, Gale took a deep breath. His skin was clammy. He was sweating. Hopefully he wasn't coming down with a cold again. Standing from his chair, he massaged a crick in his neck. The sun would be up soon. There was work to be done, and precious little time left to do it considering the scope of the task before him. Better to catch what few hours of sleep his mind would permit him than stew in such inoperable meditations.

SAPh.

2024

First Hunger

Written by White Leaf Moth

TAGS | Mature Audiences Rating, Pre-Canon, Gale Dekarios, Descriptions of Suffering, Whump (Hurt/No Comfort)

The book closed itself, the following blast knocking Gale onto the wooden floor. His eyes widened, observing the eerie black smoke coming from the tome. His heart stopped briefly while his mind tried to comprehend what just happened. That was until a sudden ache went through his chest, piercing its every angle like a thousand needles. He gasped loudly as the load of pain caused his muscles to tense.

He turned around on all fours, coughing, trying to gather his thoughts, but all his mind could process was the growing throbbing deep in his chest. He tried calling for help, but only his heartbreaking scream echoed in the study.

It seemed like he'd lost control over his body—his knees were trembling, eager to move, yet stuck to the ground. His hands went straight to his chest and as a result, his forehead hit the floor. Fingers gripped his robe and parted it, almost ripping the material apart. Gale clenched his fist and pounded the source of the pain, trying to put an end to that torture. But it struck even more intensely, splitting his veins with an electrifying chill.

"Mystra, I beg—"

The name of his love felt like a petrifying sting in his throat. He choked on his spit as another lightning bolt struck his chest. A gurgling scream came out of his mouth and tears started pouring from his eyes. His heart couldn't stop heating up, yet he was shaking from the cold. His

body was slowly transfiguring into a hell prison with no escape, leaving him with no other choice but to pray for the godsend.

Be contented, he recalled her words. But alas, he did not listen.

Calling for his goddess could have done only harm. She accepted no mistakes and no disobedience, yet he performed the most sinful of acts. And he had to pay for it.

Feeling like some parasite was moving inside his body, he crawled back to his desk. He pulled out a small mirror from the drawer to examine his chest. He squinted as the bright, purple light reflected from the glass. The pain pointed to a glowing orb-like shape on his skin, waves of which were sending throes through his ribcage. Its arms were spreading upwards, trailing damage like a poison injected into his heart.

Terrified, Gale let go of the mirror. His newly freed hand scratched the skin, desperately trying to dig the orb out. The serpentine symbols were carving themselves into his flesh and with every bend he became weaker. He writhed in agony as the arms found their way to his neck, expanding deeper to reach his throat. Unable to breathe, he put his head high, in despair massaging his neck. For a split second, he felt relief like it was all over. That respite quickly slipped by, leaving him with nothing but torment. As strings of the curse reached his left eye, they stabbed its vein, causing it to break. He hissed in pain, curling up again, and in the mirror, he saw the eye turning red with blood.

The orb stopped spreading, slowly and painfully transforming into a void. He felt the Weave being torn out of his body while the curse spread further and further, dooming him for the rest of his life. With the escaping magic, his silent question was answered—Mystra disowned him.

Hours passed. Gale laid down, with his arms stretched to the sides. His breath was shallow and the fever burned his skin. Spasms twitched his limbs every so often. Screams turned into quiet moans, weakly

escaping his chapped, thirsty lips. His body was exhausted, prepared to give up. His consciousness begged to let go. But the agony was endless. With his vision blurred with pain and sweat, he observed the pulsating, astounding light emanating from his scratched chest grace the wooden ceiling. He smiled at that view, trying to cherish it like it was the last sign of beauty he was destined to see.

With every passing second, the excruciating emptiness grew like a black hole inside his chest, loud and overwhelming. Ominous, yet luring and welcoming, inviting him to sink in. And he listened, followed the temptation. He closed his eyes, hoping death would release him from the shackles of anguish. His sentience tried to tuck itself into a blissful, forever sleep. Even the tormentor seemed to pity him—its arms embraced his body, mind and heart, covering him with a dark blanket of nothingness.

Finally, he thought, a relieved smile appearing on his tired, tender face.

"Mr Dekarios!"

A subtle gush of wind moved his hair. Gale reluctantly opened his eyes and saw a familiar tressym's face.

"Tara…?" he asked almost voicelessly.

"Don't say a word. Everything will be okay," she replied, flapping her wings at him to cool his body down. "I'm here now."

"Tara, please, tell my mother—"

"I won't tell her anything, you'll do it yourself. Tomorrow, the day or the tenday after." She looked down, examining the glowing, ominous light coming from his chest. For a split second, he had seen a terror coming onto her face before she quickly shook her head. "But you'll do it on your own. I promise."

He took a deep breath and wept, "I'm so sorry," as tears drew wet tracks on his burning hot cheeks.

"Mr Dekarios, look at me." She put her paw on his belly. "Focus on your breath. I'll help you."

His body was trembling, overwhelmed with pain and sorrow. His eyelids felt too heavy, and his mouth too dry. His lungs didn't want to obey his orders to breathe. He desperately wanted to, but…

"I can't," he whispered.

"Gale!"

Her scream was like a wake-up call. He immediately took a deep breath and coughed. He turned his head towards her and nodded, silently accepting her help.

After almost an hour, Gale could finally sit up on his own. His heartbeat became steady and he learned to breathe regularly. He leaned on a nearby dresser, trying his hardest not to let the pain take control over him again. Suddenly, his stomach tightened, but the sensation differed from before. The orb stopped its tortures—instead, it demanded to be fed. He curled his legs and embraced them, resting his forehead on the knees.

"Books… Netherese," he grunted.

The tressym didn't ask any more questions and headed towards his library.

The sound of flicking book pages filled the room. Tara flew from one bookcase to another, looking for titles that might fit the research topic. Found tomes were dropped onto the floor, allowing Gale to reach for them. With his remnants of strength, he held himself straight despite constant shivers. Desperate to ease the pain, he found a friend in a bottle of wine he kept for a special occasion.

An enchiridion fell with a loud thump, opening with the impact. He noticed a small earring with a symbol of Mystra, carefully hidden between the pages. He touched the one on his left ear, thinking he must've forgotten the other one. He reached for it and the moment his

fingers met the trinket, the orb became frantic, possessive. It commanded him to take the found artefact, and so he did.

It was emanating with the Weave. He became ravenous the longer he held it. It reminded him of the void carved in his chest; how inviting and tempting it was to lose himself. But the hunger was more aggressive and adamant.

It *needed* to be fulfilled. It *needed* to absorb it.

He looked at the earring one last time, put it to his chest, and as it touched his skin, a small wave of the Weave flew to his chest. It was gentle and soothing at first—feeling how the untainted magic covered the deathly enchantment he brought upon himself. It caressed his heart and embraced it, starting its healing process, which turned out to be far from delicate. It pierced his soul with its flaming blade sinking directly into the void's gorge. Gale screamed from that sudden throb and held his breath, waiting for the next stab.

But it never came.

Instead, it brought him immediate relief; like someone lifting a stone holding him down for ages. As he moved his hands away from his chest, there was nothing but ash on them. The earring was gone—the orb absorbed all of its magic. He released his breath and laughed shakily, trying his hardest to hold onto that respite. However, the hunger didn't disappear—it quieted down a bit but still craved more.

"Did it work?" Tara asked unsurely, landing next to Gale.

"For now," he answered, closing his exhausted, baggy eyes. "But that's not enough."

Silence reigned in the room. Even the wind stopped howling, grieving the poor man's fate. It seemed as if the sound of a carved void inside the wizard's chest echoed outside his body, painfully and jeeringly, singing the song of his doom.

Tara cried quietly, "Good gods, Gale, what have you done…?"

@roboBeasty

Here at Long Last

Written by Winter M.

TAGS | Mature Audiences Rating, Enver Gortash, Past Emotional Abuse, Past Child Abuse, Past Physical Abuse, Past Violence, Dubious Morality, Mental Health Trauma, Implied/Referenced Sexual Content, Character Study, POV Enver Gortash

Gortash's steps dragged slightly on the rugs and stone floors of his Wyrmrock's office as he paced, the sound of his metallic boots resonating in the open space. Alone, *waiting*. Gortash wouldn't describe himself as an impatient man, his plans always calculated to their minutiae.

His rise had been years in the making, years spent climbing up in power and influence, years of dirty work finally starting to pay off. Ever since he had been sold by his malicious parents, ever since he had forcibly joined the ranks of the House of Hope, Gortash had been biding his time. Time until he would be free - from the House and its devilish Master, from the bruising hands of its jailor. Time until he would have the means to take over Baldur's Gate - scraping by once he got out of the Hells, joining the Heapside Reavers, rising up as an arms dealer in the Chiontar Valley and supplanting the Zhentarim's monopoly. Time until he infiltrated the best of Baldur's Gate - rising to an advisory position in the City, making himself indispensable, blackmailing those he could not convince with his charm and quick tongue. Becoming the Chosen of Bane was almost inconsequential in Gortash's plans to take over the city, merely giving him the opportunity to expand his powers through an alliance with the Dead Three's other Chosens. Gortash, before ever being Bane's Chosen, had always been that cunning, manipulative, power

hungry human being.

Gortash paced in his luxurious Wyrmrock's office. He was awaiting his coronation, his elevation to the rank of Archduke of Baldur's Gate. *What a title,* Gortash thought. *Look at how you're proving all of them wrong,* added another voice that sounded suspiciously like Bhaal's first Chosen whispered in his mind. *I am more than they ever will,* Gortash's mind replied. So much more.

More than that uselessly scheming devil who had held his chains for the majority of his teenhood. More than his vile parents who had done nothing good in their life. More than everyone who had looked down on him, as he had climbed his way up to the top. He was to be *Archduke.* His control over the city would be assured. Then, soon, the whole of Toril would follow, bending the knee to *him* and the Elder Brain he controlled.

Gortash had to admit that the Brain was a peculiar, but not unpleasant, addition to his plans, a spur of the moment decision brought by his discovery of the Accelerated Grand Design schemes after their Cania heist. The plans were masterful, even if they came with their lot of problems. But there was also something obsessively satisfying about bringing such a powerful entity to its metaphorical knees, bending it to serve *him* above all else - or, in the meantime, the Dead Three's Chosens. The Crown was powerful indeed, and Gortash longed for total control over it. The other Chosens were… too volatile for his tastes, but he had to make due for the moment, unfortunately.

Gortash was biding his time, he was a patient man after all. Time until the other Chosens fell. Time until the stones were united in his possession. Time until Gortash could claim Toril as his own. Long gone were the days of laying low under the physical assault of hardened fists, the days of scraping by and scouring for food. The days of paranoia, always watching over his shoulders, braced for a blade striking in

between his ribs. The days of sleeping his way to the inner circles of the city. The only thing that had stayed consistent was his wanting of doing more, being *more.*

Gortash would finally be free and reign supreme. He could finally shape the world in his own image. Tyranny… Tyranny suited him just fine, as long as *he* was the one in power. Gortash chuckled faintly at the thought of his previous achievements and those yet to come. He was the Mastermind, the epitome of brain and brawn, having fought and plotted his way to the top.

Archduke Enver Gortash. He could get used to this. This life of intoxicating power and fame. But perhaps he shouldn't be getting too far ahead of himself. His plans, after all, weren't quite completed. There was much work to be done indeed and what an interesting prospect *that* was. If only…

"Lord Gortash?" someone knocked at his office's doors, interrupting his train of thought.

Gortash stopped beside his adorned desk, composing himself before answering.

"Yes?"

"It's time, my Lord," Gortash recognized one of the Keep's pages.

"Very well," Gortash simply answered, listening to the uncomfortable shuffling on the other side of the door.

Looking down at the map sprawled on his desk, Gortash smiled. It was time. Time to rise in power. Time to claim what was rightfully his. Time to prove everyone how wrong they had been.

Gortash made his way towards the door, opening it to find the visibly nervous page boy still standing there.

"Let's begin," Gortash smirked.

Time Fleas When You're Having Fun

Written by Socks

TAGS | No Content Rating Given, Halsin, Fleas, Humour, Puns, Slice of Life

Nature was where Halsin was truly the happiest. Out in the great wilds, leaves crunching under large, wide paws. He felt utterly at home in his bear form, relished the way his fur was ruffled by winds. Bedding down for the night was easier too, he didn't have to worry about much - there weren't exactly many creatures that would attack a bear, not even a sleeping one. While the Tadpole Troupe (not that he'd ever admit to anyone that was what he called them in his head) got up to all sorts of mischief, he took his time to wander the wilderness and explore. On his travels he met a plethora of animals, even had a friendly fox curl into his warmth for a night when he couldn't bring himself to return to camp and the semblance of civilisation his humanoid friends brought with them. That was assuming they hadn't descended into bickering and generally childish behaviour. If Halsin caught Astarion trying to adorn Gale's hair with flowers once more, he was going to... he didn't know what. But children would be so much easier to corral, it was why he took such long walks.

Heading back, Halsin took a leisurely pace, stopping every once in a while for a rather satisfying scratch. Rubbing his back against gnarly trees or getting a back paw under his chin had his eyes closing in bliss. Maybe the weather was turning and he was going to shed in wild clumps, that would explain the itching.

Alas, the itching only got worse as the days wore on. He tried to keep it quiet, scratched away from prying eyes. It was futile, especially when he noticed the others were less than subtly scratching at itches too. Things came to a head when Scratch lived up to his name and would not stop. Much to his shame, despite being the one with links to nature, it wasn't Halsin but rather Wyll who looked the dog over.

"We've got fleas."

The words made the tips of Halsin's ears burn in mortification. He knew where those fleas had come from. That all too friendly fox had left him a parting gift. Now they all had to deal with nature's less than pleasant aspect. And it wasn't like he had an easy fix for it. Unless…

"Gale, I don't suppose you have a nifty spell up your sleeve to banish our little pest problem?"

"Are you sure now's the time to think about getting rid of Astarion?"

Despite the jest in his words, they turned to look at Astarion, who was glaring at Gale's bedroll, eyes narrowed in focus.

"There's only room for one bloodsucker in this camp!" With such a battle cry, he set fire to the innocent bedroll, eradicating the fleas within it with extreme prejudice.

Turning back to Halsin, Gale cleared his throat. "On second thought."

They both snickered and Halsin clapped Gale on the shoulder. "I'm sure he'll pilfer you a nicer bedroll to make up for it." Or not, there was no predicting the direction Astarion's moral compass was pointing at any given moment.

Fleas were a frustration. Halsin tried everything he knew to try and get them out of their camp. Soaking and washing everything after having Wyll cast Poison Spray over things in hopes of suffocating them. Nothing worked. The flea population was rampant and out of control.

Only two people seemed unaffected by it all: Astarion and Karlach. Then again, Astarion wasn't exactly a brimming reservoir of blood while Karlach cooked anything that tried to get under her skin.

Over the course of time, Halsin had lost track of how often Astarion had approached Gale with some magical item or other and asked with a smug smile, "Snack?" In a way, it was rather satisfying to watch the tables turn. Gale had something clutched between his fingers and was determinedly marching towards Astarion who lounged by the campfire.

"Snack?" A rather rotund and freshly feasted flea was deposited in Astarion's palm and he looked torn between being offended and amused. The flea took the moment to jump off and into the darkness of the night.

A hand clutched to his chest, Astarion looked at Gale with mock betrayal in his eyes. "This is a crime! In fact, I would go as far as saying it is high fleason!"

"Ah, it would have been a fleating moment of pleasure anyway."

Halsin couldn't help but join the jesting. "It is my firm befleaf that technically that would not be a good spawn snack. After all, it wouldn't be the flea's blood Astarion was consuming, thus reducing its magical properties in terms of his needs."

Eyes lighting up, Gale turned to him, eager for a debate. Even if it was something a little less academic than he preferred. Still, beggars can't be choosers and, given their current company, a debate was a debate which was better than nothing. Before he could say anything, Astarion piped up. "No more flea jokes."

Halsin nodded gravely. "My humour fleaves a lot to be desired. I apologise profleasly."

The strangled garble of a frustrated growl was barely contained by Astarion's throat, and Gale chuckled a little harder. It filled Halsin with a familiar warmth that had nothing to do with the heat of the fire. Basking in it, he let the topic drop, all the more so because Gale was visibly trying

not to itch. All his efforts failed as he raked nails against his ankle and calf. A soft "sod it" was all the warning they got as he transformed into a dog and gnawed at his leg.

"That's disgusting." Lae'zel approached with a rather disdainful look. Rather than stop, Gale just gave a low growl and moved to give himself a good long scratch behind his ear. Not that Halsin would ever admit it, but he looked delightfully gormless, lost to the bliss of a good scratch. He'd been there, felt the same relief in bear form, and knew all too well that nothing one could do in a human form compared.

"Please tell me you bring us good news, our darling lean, green, mean machine." There was a slight whine to Astarion's voice and Halsin would have bet good gold on the fact he was jealous of Gale's ability to scratch.

An affirmative "hm" was Lae'zel's first response as she nodded. "The fleas will no longer trouble us."

"What? How?!" Not that Halsin wasn't grateful but he thought he would have to wallow in the guilt of bringing the infestation to camp and suffer its consequences a while longer.

"Withers."

Which, now that Halsin thought of it, was absolutely the most obvious solution. Next to him, Gale morphed back into his human shape.

"Withers?"

"Withers." Rather than say anything more, Lae'zel returned to her tent and began sharpening her blade once again.

The words were on the tip of Halsin's tongue. They were almost out when Astarion pointed an accusing finger at him. "Don't. Don't you dare say it."

"Please. For the first time since the unfortunate moment of meeting him, I find myself agreeing with him," Gale said.

It was too late. Smile broadening, body bracing to be pelted with

pillows and disappointed laughter, Halsin opened his mouth.

"I guess we could say that they've been defleated."

To Wane

Written by Amber Arnold

TAGS | No Content Rating Given, F/F, Isobel/Dame Aylin, Isobel Thorm, Dame Aylin, (Vague) Parental Abuse, Buried Alive, Claustrophobia, Death, Mentions of Depression, Introspection

She remembers the moonlight.

She remembers cold winters and warm springs. She remembers her mother's laughter and her father's embrace. She remembers home. A tower, a dog, a bed, a temple. She remembers herself – her moods, her humor. All the facets of emotion that spin and turn and make life worth living. Anger and cheer, frustration and accomplishment.

She remembers grief. A wan smile, a cold hand's wiry grip. Her mother's bravery, her love. The awful emptiness when she knew the world would go on but her mother would not. The hope that she would one day see her again, wrapped in the Moon Maiden's embrace.

She remembers rapture. A sideways glance, the curve of a smile. Arms that could lift her, a heart that could hold her. What it feels like to be enthralled, to lose all aspects of yourself in the dizzying fall of love. She remembers fingers in her hair and knuckles tracing her cheek; she remembers how Aylin's skin always smelled of the clouds: ozone, moisture, dew. Freedom.

Life, love, faith, joy. She remembers living, she remembers loving. She remembers being loved.

She does not remember dying.

Darkness: it is not a memory, yet somehow a recollection. Abject darkness – no moon, no stars. There is a quality to emptiness that is

difficult to define: to exemplify *absence* is to have no definable trait. But that void is all she remembers between the *then* of before and the *here* of now. Darkness, encompassing and total. No light calling her home; there is only silence from both her goddess and her mother.

It is what she does not remember which frightens her: that black splotch when she cannot recall existing at all. She has long known what will happen to her soul when she dies – no woman of faith would not – as she knows that death is not an end. Yet she remembers a period when she did not exist, and this in itself is impossible.

It is cold where she is now, a cold that spreads both within and without her body. A strange, impossible cold – yet still, far more comforting than that expanse of nothing which stretches in her memory.

And from the depths of her memories, she recognizes the smells that greet her. Candle wax. Withered threshing. Bone meal. Rot. She remembers coming here as a girl, visiting her mother. Although she lay concealed in darkness, she recognizes where she is: the Thorm family tomb. What she does not recognize is her own self.

Something cold has settled within her, something putrid and unmovable. She feels it rise as bile in her throat – as a raw cough, ragged and wet. It is as though her body has long forgotten how to breathe, like a mechanism rusting in disuse. Her joints are stiff with a strange ache; knots twist in her gut. Her heart pounds distantly in her chest: a rhythm unmeasured, uncomfortable, and unfamiliar.

There is no light here, and yet it is not as dark as that expanse she cannot remember.

Isobel reaches up and presses her hand against – stone, above her. A slate.

She looks at the outline of her own hand, flat against the lid of her tomb. It is a strange sensation to actively notice your own blood coursing your veins – could she always feel it? Those rivulets of life must have

once felt natural; her hand, somehow, no longer looks so. She studies the tiny wrinkles across her knuckles, the curve of her wrist and her thumb. She studies the shapes below the skin, the delicate outline of bones that resemble the strings of a harp. Was this the same hand as the life she lived before? Was this the same body as the person she'd been?

She remembers – she remembers her hands, remembers looking down on her own actions, both those miraculous and mundane. Her hands once laid upon the sick, once shone with the Moon Maiden's power. She remembers clasping them peacefully in prayer, fingers relaxed and eyes uplifted. She remembers bathing and clothing herself; she remembers how nimbly she would fasten a button or lather a bar of soap.

She remembers the day she met Aylin, and how her hand felt as she took it – how Aylin kissed her knuckles as though Isobel were a princess in a fairytale. She remembers rubbing that spot on her hand, heat spreading along her knuckles, as she watched the dashing figure of the aasimar move to other business in the temple.

She remembers clasping her hands even tighter in prayer that night, asking her own goddess if it was right – if it was permitted – that she should feel this way about her Lady's own *daughter*. She brought the knuckles of that same hand to her lips and tried to replicate the exact feeling that Aylin had filled her with that day.

She remembers some time later, when Aylin took her hand to help her out of a carriage. She remembers their shared reluctance to let go. And she remembers sometime after that – the first time she reached up and touched Aylin's cheek, brushed her hair back from her face, traced her lower lip with an index finger. She remembers Aylin's hands on her hips, on her back, on her legs; she remembers Aylin lifting her bodily off her feet when they kissed. She remembers her hands in her hair and her arms around her. She remembers that same hand – whose knuckles had been kissed and fingers had been held – sliding down the sturdy contours

of Aylin's stomach, and watching the faint lines her nails left in her lover's skin.

The same hand that, now, pressed against the lid of her coffin.

The same hand – yet infinitely different.

Is it paler? More gnarled? Colder? She cannot tell. Yet neither can she stitch together that hand which existed in light and love with the phantom that pressed now in death and darkness. It feels like something vile churns just under her skin; how could such a hand ever touch Aylin again? How could they touch without this pale ichor smudging the vibrant colors of her lover's skin?

Isobel pushes – the lid relents. It slides to the side and welcomes gloomy candlelight into her refuge. The air feels wrong. It blends with the sickness in her own body, as though somehow an extension of it. That sickness churns again in her gut and she feels a cough raise in her lungs, chest, throat – and then it is not a cough at all.

She leans over the side of her coffin and retches a dark, stinking substance onto the floor below. Flecks of sick sizzle on the wicks of lit candles and settle into pools of cooling wax. Pain shoots along her nerves; her body has forgotten what it feels to live, and the recollection begets pain.

She retches again but nothing comes out; she coughs, tears streaming down her cheeks. Her fingertips ache with muscles sore from disuse; her pulse pounds in her ears. She curls her hands around the lip of her coffin and tries to find her voice, her breath, her heartbeat. There is a bog within her and she cannot dispel it, cannot push past it. She realizes that the bog *is* her, now, and she cannot remember ever feeling so filthy.

She cannot remember a time when the moonlight felt so distant.

She cannot remember dying, but she remembers what it felt like to live – this is not that.

"Isobel-"

Her name comes as a breathless whisper from a voice like stone. She lays her cheek on the edge of her coffin and rolls her head, too weak to fully lift it. A shadow stands in the doorway and it, like her own body, looks at home in darkness.

Her voice will not work; her breath will not come. Sickness unspools her, unraveling the fragments of the person she used to be. Faith, laughter, family, love – they are distant, now. Vague memories in a heart that can no longer feel their warmth. From the depths of this thing she has become, she wonders if she will ever feel that warmth again.

What is this half-life? What is this creature that lay in Isobel's grave?

She both does and does not recognize her father, standing in the doorway ahead of her. He looks as at home in the darkness as she feels.

Her voice will not come. While blood pumps in her veins, she cannot tell if she is alive or dead. She cannot feel the moonlight, she cannot hear her goddess. Her breath comes easily in this place of darkness and that, above all else, worries her most.

Her voice will not come. Her lips grind, dry and cracked, against each other. Her throat scratches with a scream she cannot produce. Her eyes water and sting.

What have you done? She asks him, over and over again, screaming in her own mind.

What have you done?

Tin Whistle

Written by Vyxcordia

TAGS | General Audiences Rating, No Archive Warnings Apply, Jaheira, Karlach Cliffgate

Between bartering with a diabolist, fending off the advances and attacks of an incubus, and killing the heir to an archdevil, it had been a long day, to say the least. Jaheira was exhausted. Even the younger party members she was concerned about keeping up with seemed ready to call it a night.

They trudged along, looking for a spot to set up camp. The only one with energy left was Karlach, who never sat still. Karlach was presently buzzing around Jaheira like a fly. She still hadn't gotten over Jaheira's "fame," looking at her with wide puppy dog eyes.

"Did you need something?" She turned to Karlach with an eyebrow raised.

"Oh, hi." Karlach seemed startled that Jaheira had noticed her staring. As if she hadn't been doing it all day. Jaheira would land a blow on an enemy and Karlach would practically giggle with glee at the sight. She wished the tiefling would focus more on her own problems in battle. "I was uh… I had a question." Even though Karlach was phrasing it like she already had the question in mind, she still seemed to be coming up with it on the spot. "Do you like to… that is… What do you like to do?"

It was not the question she had been expecting. *What's it like being the High Harper,* perhaps, or *How did you defeat the mage Irenicus,* but this was a strange, rather mundane interview question. Jaheira… didn't know how to answer. With her mouth slightly parted, she wracked her brain. "As in… hobbies?" She asked for clarification, though she didn't

really need it.

Karlach nodded in excitement, further digging Jaheira into a hole. "Oh..." Jaheira hummed. Why was this question so hard for her to answer? When was the last time she partook in a hobby? Practicing her combat skills and spells wasn't exactly a hobby. She needed to do that, or risk becoming dull, and therefore risk her life. She communed with nature often, taking care of plants and animals, but that was also a druidic duty, not a hobby, as much as she loved to do it.

Hobbies... were for people who weren't terribly busy with fate-of-the-world type quests. Jaheira had responsibilities. She didn't have time for hobbies.

The party had finally picked a place for camp, and Jaheira let her heavy pack fall to the ground with a dull thud and a metallic clang. That did remind her. There was one item in that pack that she did not use every day for very important reasons. She could've easily waved off Karlach's question and told her to find some other way to entertain herself. But sometimes puppy dog eyes were not so easy to say no to.

"Well... I like to play music, I suppose?" She shrugged, then eased herself to a seat on a wide tree root, leaning back against the trunk with a soft exhale. As soon as she sat down, a wave of exhaustion hit her.

A similar wave did not hit Karlach as she sat cross-legged next to Jaheira, almost expectantly. Like she was waiting to be told a bedtime story. Oh, brother. "What do you play?"

Jaheira glanced at her pack, which was a mistake. Karlach followed her gaze with excitement. She had given it away that she did keep an instrument there. "Mostly the same children's rhyme, on a battered whistle of tin."

Karlach blinked. That wasn't the answer she expected. Now she was finally getting a taste of the real Jaheira, not the fantastical one of exaggerated legend. Jaheira had lived long enough to master many

disciplines, but music was not one of them. She feared she might not even have the natural talent or patience to master music anyway, even if she was given another lifetime to attempt such.

"Please play!" Karlach still begged, despite knowing nothing impressive would happen at such a recital. Jaheira groaned. She had backed herself into a corner.

"Surely there is something less boring you could…" Jaheira started, but one more look at Karlach's face convinced her. The poor girl had been tortured, experimented on, and forced to fight in Avernus for ages. The least an old hero could do was entertain her.

With a sigh, Jaheira reached into her pack, rifling around blindly until her fingers wrapped around her instrument. It was less shiny than she remembered, picking up a patina over the years. Karlach was beaming, of course, oblivious to the instrument's neglect. She pumped her fist when the instrument emerged from the pack, like she was really about to see a show.

Jaheira could not believe she was actually doing this. She leaned forward off the tree trunk, studying the holes of the tin whistle. Her grip was muscle memory, despite the time that had passed, and the progression of notes was all coming back to her too. *Good, the sooner I play her a little song, the sooner Karlach will find someone else to bother,* Jaheira thought to herself, but she didn't exactly believe it.

Lifting the mouthpiece to her lips, her finger on the first note, Jaheira blew steadily… And the note sounded awful. More awful than she had expected. The unpleasant pitch was accompanied by a puff of dust from the end of the whistle. Jaheira froze.

Karlach, on the other hand, laughed. She rocked backwards, overcome with mirth, giggling like a little kid. Jaheira rolled her eyes, but found herself infected by the laughter, chuckling with her mouth closed.

"I did not realize it had really been that long." Jaheira shook her

head, looking down at the sad little instrument, a warm smile on her face. Who was she kidding? She had no intention of actually impressing Karlach anyway, and the dust was rather amusing. Jaheira let herself laugh.

Karlach sat back up, recovering from her laughing fit. "Sorry, I didn't want to make any age jokes, but you kinda made that one yourself."

"Hey…" Jaheira replied, in a playfully threatening tone, reaching over and swatting Karlach with the end of the whistle.

Karlach put her hands up in surrender. "Is that all you've got then?"

"No…" Jaheira decided she did want to try again, hoping the dust had been cleared now. She raised the whistle to her lips once more, playing the first note of the song again. This time, the whistle rang clearly, on pitch and without any dust.

The song was simple and short, a playful tune children would sing and clap their hands to. There were six holes on the tin whistle, and seven notes Jaheira knew how to play. One octave… Jaheira remembered her brief lessons as a child. Her teacher would be embarrassed by her technique, she was sure, but she made it through the song.

Something about playing it again brought tears to her eyes. Jaheira looked out into the forest, avoiding eye contact with Karlach. She had learned this song when she was nothing but the spoiled daughter of a noble, and her parents were now long gone. And she had played that song for Khalid one night, when they were just two lonely Harpers on a mission, sleeping under the stars.

The song ended, and Jaheira lowered the whistle. She was grateful for her long life, as she had the chance to help so many people and protect the cycle of life in the Oak Father's name. But in her long life she had also seen so much death, and experienced so much loss. This was

part of the cycle, but that didn't make it hurt any less.

And now they were headed to fight some enslaved Elder Brain monstrosity, and there was a slim chance they'd succeed, and even if they did, she would likely lose some of these obnoxious party members that she did in fact care very much about… It was all exhausting. Jaheira was exhausted.

Jaheira rubbed her eye, then turned back to look at Karlach. "Now that is all I've got."

Karlach was oblivious to the thoughts swirling in Jaheira's mind, still grinning at the fact that she'd gotten *the* Jaheira to play a tune for her. She gave thunderous applause. "Well it was lovely! Thank you!"

"You are most welcome…" Jaheira sighed, rolling the whistle between her fingers. Karlach's energy was infectious, once again. That girl had seen so much shit, and yet she wasn't moping around. "And thank you, Karlach. For reminding me how to have a little fun." She lifted the whistle again.

The second time she played the song, it was faster and more confident. There was a little joy in her breath. That was what she was fighting for, anyway. For everyone to live happily and joyfully ever after. An impossible goal, but her goal nonetheless. And while she worked her way there, she could have a little fun too.

As the sun set, fireflies began lighting up the forest. They floated lazily about, bouncing as if they were enjoying Jaheira's tune.

A Damned Shame

Written by Chernovagames

TAGS | No Content Rating Given, Karlach Cliffgate, Alcohol, Angst, Blood, Death, Gore, Guilt

Smaller? Smaller. Tighter somehow. Like a pair of leather breeches left in the sun a hair too long. Familiar but uncomfortable to squeeze into. The same, yet changed and discoloured. *'Ah-ha-ha, yes, that's it!'* A sense of earned satisfaction washed over the barbarian as she came to that agreement in her head. The feeling had been buzzing around in the tiefling's mind all day, itching and gnawing, until she was finally able to squash it in its place. *'That's what it feels like to be back.'*

A decade in the Nine Hells. A full decade as a lab rat turned guard dog to the Archduchess. An endless decade in servitude to Zariel and her cause in the Bloody War. A whole ten years, and now Karlach Cliffgate was back in Baldur's Gate.

Well, almost. Just getting here was no easy feat, breaching the gates already battered and bruised is a risk her party wasn't going to take. Instead, they made camp overlooking Rivington, the city's mudroom.

"Tight, sweaty and, stinky..." she exhaled, pacing in front of her tent, arms swinging as she made sharp, practised turns, walking one way, then the other. Sleep never came easy to Karlach, her mind forever a'gallop, failing to catch up with her rearing heart, even before any infernal modifications made it beat with an unnatural force. Tonight, rest was going to be an impossible task. What with her childhood home being within arm's reach, and as much as she wanted to see the cobbled streets

she grew up on, that was not all that awaited her within those walls.

Karlach has changed, more than she'd like. The city has, too. With Gortash being the maker of that change, it wouldn't be a pretty sight. The thought sent a flare down her shoulders and arms, the Archduke's smug and twisted smirk burning hot in her memory. If it were up to her, she'd be marching over to Wyrm's Rock to hack his bloated head off his shoulders right about now. But there's a reason she trusts her companions, so the eager barbarian is willing to stick to the plan.

"Enter the city, get the netherstones from that narcissistic fuck and the murder bitch, and deal with the elder brain," she recited out loud. "And then… Then the happy ever after. For some." Her pace slowed, coming to a halt. She raised a hand to feel her glowing sternum. 'Not for the ol' gal over here.' She stood under the weight of that thought for a moment. Even if she survives the battles ahead, that thing Zariel put in her chest was going to kill her anyway.

Unless she returns to Avernus, of course. "A weapon by your side, or nothing at all. Clever, Z." She sighed. No, her heart couldn't be fixed, Karlach knew that. It was forever changed by the infernal flames that forged it and no amount of repairs would ever make it what it once was. All that was left - a tool tainted by blood that couldn't be washed away. Karlach often wondered if the same could be said about her.

"Come now, princess. Did your mother-goddess not teach you to share?" A voice smooth as wine spilt over the camp.

Karlach's head snapped up at the familiar cadence, keen to escape the hollow dark her thoughts were slipping into. She was already marching towards the sound when another voice joined. Higher than the first, thinner, yet formidable, like fresh water rushing through a spring, and just as entitled.

"Actually, we were taught that a share is *earned.* Tell me, what does being an insufferable tick earn you besides an inflated sense of self?"

"High spirits and a skin to die for, kind of you to ask. Now don't be a brat and hand over the wine." A pale elf lay on a bedroll by the fire, elbows propping up his body as he reached upwards.

"Out of everyone, the living and the dead, you don't get to call me that the most." A half-elven woman with stark white hair begrudgingly handed him the bottle and sat down opposite.

Astarion and Shadowheart have taken to this nightly ritual as of late. The pair share a bottle or three, cracking quips at the other's expense, all while pretending to barely tolerate the company they chose. The vampire would deny it while the priestess would never admit it, but after all this time, they were friends, and as grating as some might find the two, Karlach grew to like them both.

"Speak of the devil, why don't you join us sinners by the fire?" Astarion beckoned Karlach, gesturing beside him. "We were just discussing her Majesty's carnal adventures or lack thereof."

"Hm, remind me, how many of those notches on your bedpost are from willing victims, rather than those who were turned into blood bags soon after?" Shadowheart bit back.

"Careful, princess, jealousy doesn't go well with your shiny new locks." Astarion shot Shadowheart a rogueish smile. "Ha-anyway, what about you, Karlach? What steamy tales have you from the depths of Hell?"

"Hah! Not many fish in those depths. Imps patching me up between battles was as tender as it got. Thank the Gods I still had my imagination!" Karlach dropped down on her backside with a noticeable thump.

"Well, that's astonishingly sad. No wonder you were dying to get out. All fire and no fun." Astarion sat up, taking a generous gulp out of the bottle, scrunching his face in disgust as he handed Karlach the wine.

"Ignore the thirsty ghoul, I for one want to hear about the things

you've faced. Years of service as an infernal warrior slaying demons… I've seen what you are capable of in this realm, one can only imagine what you must have been like down there." Shadowheart leaned in closer looking to the red-skinned woman with curious expectation.

"Ah, yes. If none were worthy of your bed, certainly many were laid to rest by your blade.

Go on, 'Fury of Avernus', do tell."

"Hah! Well, I've seen plenty. Enough to make a thrall wish they were stepped on as an i-i-itty-bitty tadpole!" She put the wine to her lips, failing to sip. More words burst forth. "The sight of a pit fiend alone will have you screaming out for mama, ha-ha!" She lifted the bottle, drinking hungrily, her other hand wiping away the red liquid from her mouth. "There's no order. Blood, bones and flesh all meld into one—bodies dropping all around you, warm ichor spraying in your eyes." Karlach's gaze was lost in the flickering flames before her. "Half the time you don't know what you're swinging at. But you do. Like a perfect little wind-up soldier."

"I don't know what I pictured, but it sounds even more terrible somehow." Shadowheart gingerly removed the now empty bottle that was resting beside the tiefling.

"It sounds like we need more wine."

"What I did for her…" Karlach continued, unaware of the other two. "The way I carved and gutted anything that stood in her path… It was intoxicating. To be this great at something so awful. To feel that power in my core and not having to control it all the time. I hate how good it would feel sometimes."

"You did what you had to do to survive, Karlach. You had no choice, regardless of how it felt in the moment, right? And now you're here, aren't you?" Shadowheart's voice wavered.

"That's just it, isn't it? *I* am here. *Me.* I'm not the little spurt that

got sold to serve in the Hells. I'm the thing that came back."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Damn it! I can't undo the things I did. Fucked up heart or not. I'm not a little girl who can just forget everything that happened. I'm… I'm…"

"A monster." From behind Karlach a soft pop was heard as Astarion tossed a freshly uncorked bottle of liquor in her lap. "She means a monster." Karlach watched as the vampire sat back down, his eyes never meeting hers.

The camp fell silent bar the soft crackle of the fire and a muted beating of a hellish heart.

Cosmic Sea Slugs

DR. RYUU

Twice Shy

Written by Skitch

TAGS | No Content Rating Given, Karlach Cliffgate, Lae'zel of crèche K'liir Cameo, Blood/Gore, Canon-Typical Violence, Character Study, Introspection

The final upgrade feels identical to the first—the hiss of scalding metal against Karlach's skin, the feeling of something in the cavity of her chest stretching, swelling, settling, the dull *clunk* of the new shielding slotting into place. But *oh,* the relief that follows is like the first patter of cold spring rain on a cobbled street; the promise of rejuvenation, that all is well, and that all will be well. For a heartbeat, Karlach stands stock-still, eyes closed, breathing deep, feeling the heat on her skin begin to dissipate, soaking in the clammy evening air—all of the simple sensory pleasures that have been denied her, all these years.

Then Dammon clears his throat, and the moment is gone.

The only way to avoid catastrophic engine failure is to return to Avernus. Fucking typical, Karlach thinks, kicking a fist-sized chunk of masonry aside as she picks her way back across the churned, muddy yard, back into the soft glow of the inn. She got the miracle she'd been half-praying for, all this time, managed to slip the lead—and now she's supposed to throw herself down at Zariel's feet and plead for mercy, to preserve the pitiful half-life she was leading before that nautiloid came screaming through the hells? Half of her companions will probably insist on that when they find out, come to think of it.

They mean well. That takes some of the sting from the thought, smothers the embers of her temper. They'd miss her if she burned up, but she'd be just as out of reach in Avernus, wouldn't she? At least the dead

are permitted some rest.

Something stirs within her as she steps over the threshold of the common room—not the familiar dull ache of rage, but something sharper, more urgent. A slick, oily, nauseating feeling that pools heavy in her stomach as Alfira catches sight of her, affords her a wan smile, the other tiefling's hands clasped tightly in her lap. As Harpers bustle around her, oblivious, bearing crates of scavenged munitions. As Jaheira (Jaheira! Hero of a thousand tales, a legend made flesh!) grants her a tight nod in passing. Karlach cannot place the sensation—not until a shadow moves in the periphery of her vision (and in her mind's eye it is winged and towering, an imperious arm raised) and her hands go momentarily numb, ears buzzing, her engine thudding against her ribs so violently that she thinks, distantly, that it just might sunder her skin.

(She hadn't felt this since the day she was wrenched into the hells; the certainty of impending doom, the primal force that would drive a wild dog to gnaw through the tendons of its own leg in a bid to escape the woodsman's trap. That first year in Avernus lives in her memory as a watery smear of pain and confusion and terror—every avenue of escape was closed to her, and even the other unwilling conscripts turned away from her, envious of the favor, such as it was, that Zariel showed her. The infernal engine had made her feel as though her organs were boiling within her for months after it was installed. She had wept, most nights, curled into as tight a ball as she could manage, missing her parents, missing the smell of the earth after a day's rain, sometimes even missing that rat-bastard Gortash, back when she couldn't dream of him betraying her—wanting more than anything to know *why.* Afraid that she would fall before she had the opportunity to ask.

But the fear had dulled, after that, dwindled to nothing; she could only endure so many barbed words, so many pointless battles, before something had to give. She had excelled at violence even before she was

thrust into that endless war, and violence became her only reprieve—but even so, the monotony began to wear at her. Every day the same; march where she was told to march, kill what she was told to kill. The sight of a two-hundred strong horde no longer sent a thrill down her spine; the insults of her fellow conscripts no longer registered as anything more than unintelligible noise. If this was all her life had amounted to—would ever amount to—then why bother indulging the fear of losing it? What was there to hold on to?)

Now, though—now she has friends as strenuously (as some would deny the allegation), and the ability to touch and be touched in kind, and the taste of sun-ripened fruit, stripped in great handfuls from a scraggling bush, still lingers on her tongue. And Zariel would delight in wrenching all of these little pleasures from her, one by one, until she regresses into the dull-eyed automaton she used to be. The devil's hardest-won trophy, beset on all side by jealous hands. She wants to believe that she would rather melt down into a pile of steaming, bloody slag out of pure spite, but the truth of the matter is this: she's pants-pissing, bones-gone-to-jelly terrified by the prospect of having all of this ripped from her hands before she's even had the opportunity to enjoy it. If that makes her a coward, then fuck it—she'll be the embodiment of cowardice.

Scrubbing both hands over her face, Karlach turns to ascend the stairs. She'll take a moment to digest the news in private, come back fighting-fresh. She selects a room at random once she reaches the top, shoulders her way in with her eyes fixed on the floor—and halts immediately as a figure within rises into a crouch, hissing out a breath between their teeth, long, ridged ears angled forward. Lae'zel.

Karlach takes a reflexive step back, raising both hands with a little *woah,* brows drawn down. *Beat,* and breath, and the set of Lae'zel's jaw

relaxes, almost imperceptibly, though she does not seat herself again, not yet. "You have need of me?"

"Nah." Karlach allows her hands to fall back to her sides. "Just looking for a place to sit and think. I'll let you be."

Lae'zel huffs out a breath, angles her head away a little, eyes thinning. "...You may remain. I do not find your presence as irritating as I might some others."

That's as close to a compliment as Lae'zel's offered most of them, and Karlach flashes her a wry grin as she steps further into the room. Lae'zel folds herself to the ground again, legs crossed, shoulders hunched, and Karlach follows suit, seating herself against the wall by the door, one knee drawn up. There's a restless tension to Lae'zel's posture that can't go unaddressed for long, she knows.

But Lae'zel is famously stubborn, and so: "All that shit with Voss is still weighing on you, huh?"

Lae'zel's head whips around again, viper-fast, and Karlach arches a brow, unruffled by the heat of her gaze. "I know, I know. None of my business, us lesser beings wouldn't understand."

"You would not," Lae'zel mutters, and the corner of Karlach's mouth twitches.

"I know a little about how it feels, though," she ventures. "When you go through life thinking things are one way, and someone smashes the floor out from under you." Karlach's engine kicks against her ribs again, hard, as Lae'zel peers back at her, and Karlach does not flinch from it. "And you have to sit there and wonder—if all of my assumptions were wrong, what about the choices I made? What about the choices I'm going to make? The people I decided to trust. *Have* to trust."

(The parasite twitches behind her eye; the image of Gortash, smiling serenely, hands clasped, as she is dragged away. Heat licking up her spine. The old rage, lurking in the periphery, barely quelled.)

"…You should hold on to that feeling," Karlach continues, one hand clenching and unclenching, her breaths coming slow, deliberate. Controlled. "Fear means you've still got something worth protecting from the world."

Lae'zel does not turn to face her again, but her shoulders tighten—in suspicion, or denial. Karlach exhales hard through her nose. *I'm dying,* some small, distant part of her wants to say. *I'm dying, and now I'm afraid of dying, and the only thing I could do to stop it is the one thing I can't bear to do. I want you to live the life I've been denied. I want us both to be free.*

It wouldn't help anything, she knows, and the conclusion is Lae'zel's to come to. So, she says nothing; merely leans back against the wall, eyes fixed on a whorl in the wooden floor, and tries to ignore the sudden tightness in her chest. What little life she has left is worth protecting. She won't let anyone take that from her, or her friends, again.

Leaving the Cave

Written by Artifice

TAGS | No Content Rating Given, No Archive Warnings Apply, Lae'zel of crèche K'liir, Wyll Ravengard, Allegory of the Cave, Autonomy, Isolation, Sacrifice, Self-Identity

Lae'zel watched Kith'rak Voss leave upon Qudenos. She was not thinking of the tadpole or the Mind Flayers. She was thinking of her hunger to be in the sky, how the wind would feel on her face. Her blood smeared skin would match perfectly with its scales that shone a deep crimson. With each flap of the dragon's enormous wingspan, Voss ascended. It seemed to propel an unparalleled sense of autonomy.

"Autonomy?" The word rolled around in her brain; it was quite the word to pick at this moment. Born and raised to comply and carry out the will of Vlaakith, the mere thought of life with only her at the helm sent shivers down her spine. Before she could decide if it was a good or bad feeling, she noticed the looming shadow of her closest companion.

They were dragonborn, and at first meeting she was immediately enamored. Their scales were not the usual red she was accustomed to but a shocking teal that faded into a shimmering deep pink. If that was not enough, they proved themselves a worthy soldier.

There was a bit of embarrassment hidden deep within herself from her failed attempt to court the dragonborn. She expressed it simply by allowing them to be far more vocal than any of her other companions, and giving them literal space. Wyll's monster hunting tales helped make the transition easier.

Maybe that was where she'd gripped this growing idea of autonomy, the brief intimacy she felt she'd held with the dragonborn

may have not left her empty handed.

"He was lying." Their eyes did not disguise their concern and a dash of fear. "He is not going to see your queen."

"I'm glad it wasn't just me that noticed that weird change in the conversation." Wyll sideled over, eager to discuss. "It's one thing to lie to us, but another thing to lie to fellow githyanki."

While she was quick to brush off most opinions, she was not so naive as to reject Wyll's assertion. He was very accustomed to those more powerful than him being deceptive.

"What are you thinking, Lae'zel?" She looked solemnly up to this dragonborn she admired, how could she tell them that she was feeling fear? She was no coward, her whole life has prepared her to be putting her life on the line. As long as it meant the destruction of ghaik.

"It is to be expected, if I too am dishonest." She gestured to their drow paladin, who was carrying the curious artefact that somehow was aiding them. Githyanki in origin, yet she could not fathom handing it over. Not that she could pry it from the paladin's firm grip.

"That's not the same… he's got more of a responsibility, doesn't he?" Wyll shifted his weight, attempting to give something intangible to her.

"You assert far too much authority on me, I would be so blessed to be in his presence."

Authority, was that what she'd meant to think earlier? It did not carry the same warmth that *autonomy* had.

"Lae'zel, you haven't given me any reason to think otherwise." The dragonborn knew how to compliment her in a way she craved, but not enough to make her overstep yet again.

"Istik." she chided. "You'd do better to respect the hierarchy of my people. The people that will save you and all others' from the excruciating transformation of ghaik."

For the first time in a while, she felt her words go soft without the level of sternness the others had come to attribute to her.

"We are wasting time! The crèche is close. We can be free of these parasites, *finally.*" Maybe if she said the words out loud, they would become reality. This was the protocol but she had never met anyone who had experienced removal. Most were slain as a mercy on the field, or shortly after succumbing to the transformation.

"I agree. I think we should take a short rest, then make our way through." The paladin would surprise her often with support and logic.

She followed the others with the posture of one who would maybe be so lucky to earn a silver sword to carry.

While she knew that rest was ideal for the perfect soldier, she would not be afraid to admit that her time amongst Faerun was isolating. She loathed these moments; they'd simply bonded better with each other over her. The closest bond she'd felt otherwise was on ice, left to cool down lest she cause them to flee out of discomfort.

A longing lingered in her stomach, an emotion with no purpose, yet it persisted. She watched the paladin astride Karlach and Shadowheart, the three nearly inseparable. The dragonborn shifted between a polite conversation with the bard and Astarion. Although she could tell from their tail's movement, it was not as polite as they desired.

"Lae'zel, take a moment. It was quite a hike up here." Wyll had snuck up behind.

"Do you think me that weak? A trek of that length would exhaust me?" She was irritated by how he maintained his smile, still gesturing to the space beside him. "If you insist." She joined him, reluctantly.

"The others are caught up in each other. I cannot blame them considering the circumstances, it's hard to be alone with our little worms." He pointed to his head, earning himself an eye roll from her.

"But I'm not so selfish to forget we're all carrying our own weight."

"I don't need anyone to carry me."

"Not like that! I meant like, symbolically in relation to our duties, beliefs, even fears."

"I do not carry something so unnecessary as a fear." She lied to herself.

"I'm carrying my own weight, *including* fears. I don't think that impacts my skills."

"I'll take note of that the next time you fall in battle." He chuckled despite her seriousness.

"When I was younger, my father meant the world. He was everything I aspired to be, until one day he wasn't. My failure to meet his expectations . . . it destroyed everything between us. Even if I thought what I was doing was right."

"If it was right and what your people needed, why would it do such a thing?"

"Because the way that I thought I could be of use, be the best version of myself. It came at a cost, and he did not see the value. Maybe one day he might."

"You truly believe you know better than him? Blade of Frontiers?"

"Is that a bit of humor I detect?" He teases. "When you see this face of scars and my horns. But inside I'm still following what I consider to be true. If giving some of myself would help me save Baldur's Gate and the people I care for, I would always pick them. Even if they could not see the value of it. Even if no one cheered for me. Even if my father hated me."

She felt a churning in her stomach as she processed.

"Do you think Voss is lying . . . for us . . . for his people?"

"Are you not lying to protect us?" She sucked her teeth thinking of the artefact. "He may be lying for your people. I do not think you should

let down your guard but maybe there's more yet to learn."

"But, to assert he would know better than Vlaakith herself?"

"Even if they hated you, would you not do what you thought was the best for them?"

"Protection of my people and Vlaakith are what I was born for. It will be what I die for. But thinking I could know better than her would be almost certain death."

"Those in power tend to overlook cracks from above. They miss things we can see, things we know would be better for our people. I made that choice to get the power to do that. Against their will, but it was a choice I stand by. My choice."

"A choice. *Your choice.* I could dare think I know better?"

"You could."

Lae'zel watched quietly as Wyll smugly grinned. He has had this conversation before, although this might be the first time someone actually listened.

"Is it lonely?"

"Lonely?"

"To make a choice others might not understand, as you said." She sees the realization spread across his face. She was questioning the sadness he hid behind the Blade of Frontiers.

"I suppose it has been... but clearly it won't *always* be." He gestured to their makeshift band of tadpole'd survivors. "Maybe it just looks different than what we expected." He sighed longingly – she suspected he was thinking of his life before Mizora. His future drastically had been altered as much as he was physically, and yet he still became a defender of Baldur's Gate and more.

She turned to stare into the sky once more, Qudenos long gone. Even without the crimson dragon, she could feel that lingering sense of autonomy. She blinked slowly, testing to see if it was fleeting, but it

persisted.

Maybe, much like Wyll, her desires would have to be achieved differently. Something far less simple than following the standard githyanki training manual. She looked back towards the warlock feeling his jolly presence seeping.

"Perhaps, without the horns." She blurted out loud.

"Excuse me?" He didn't wait for an explanation and broke out in a hysterical laughter. It didn't take long to gather the others' attention, inquiring to see what had caused it. She watched their gazes warmly observe her and Wyll, feeling anything but alone.

Elturel Falls

Written by Polly

TAGS | No Content Rating Given, Pre-Game, Raphael, Korrilla Hearthflame, Fall of Elturel

The screams of the damned could be heard from Raphael's House of Hope. It was a tune so sweet that not even Milil could match it. The city of Elturel, bound by infernal chains, was slowly being pulled into the River Styx. The Companion, a shining light that once protected the city, now lured it closer and closer to damnation. What was once a beacon of hope was now a shadowy beacon of despair. Whilst Raphael wasn't in the habit of complimenting Zariel, he really had to hand it to her: this was inspired.

He could imagine the tales the bards would tell of this hellish event; the lyrics to a hopeless song of Elturel. Would they sing about the downfall of the Hellriders? They *were* the ones to leave Zariel to her fate, after all. Or would they sing about the dreaded chains that pulled Elturel closer and closer to damnation?

A familiar set of footsteps echoed behind him. Raphael smiled to himself mischievously. "A sight like this reminds me of a certain spirit's tune. *O sing a song of Elturel, when foes are at her door, her fields torn by cloven feet, from some infernal shore."* When his tune received no reaction from his audience, he changed the subject slightly. "Isn't it entertaining to see how they run from the Companion, something that once protected them? Even you must find this sight interesting, Korilla."

Korilla lost herself in the sight for a moment before replying. "When I heard that Zariel was planning something, I never expected…

this. Even the spirit of the Elfsong has changed their tune to reflect Elturel's plight; that's never happened before."

"Even the spirits mourn as Elturel falls. A mighty city, now reduced to an infernal demise." Raphael glanced over at his companion and noticed how much the scenery had taken her. He saw the flames of Avernus reflected in her eyes as Elturel burned brighter and brighter. "Do you know what caused all of this, in the end? Greed. Zariel wished for more recruits for her infernal army, and a priest wished to rid Elturel of the undead, no matter the cost. The priest doomed an entire city just to keep it safe for fifty short years."

"We both know this won't change the Blood War," noted Korilla. "Ever since Zariel showed up, she's been convinced that she'll be the one to finally end it. She surrendered her celestial right to finish it. How can one so powerful be so blind?"

"Zariel won't last long; mark my words," he snarled. "Whilst the Sword of Zariel may be her one chance of redemption, I know for a fact that she won't take it. It would be much better off in our hands, wouldn't you agree? My collection is far too small for someone of my birthright. I intend to improve upon it."

Korilla's eyes turned away from Elturel for a moment. "No one has touched it in years. Why would Zariel give such a thing to you? Even if she doesn't want it, I doubt she'd just give it away so easily."

Raphael's eyes glistened in the distant flames. "I'm afraid that I haven't told you the whole story. Those who were behind Elutrel's fall wish for the destruction of Baldur's Gate, too. The only thing standing between them is a group of adventurers I've had my eye on. They'll need the Sword of Zariel if they wish to save Elturel, and perhaps a helping hand from yourself."

"Another scouting mission, I take it?" Korilla nodded firmly. "I'll find out what I can. What are the terms that you were thinking of?"

"Simple. I'll help them out here and there, ensuring their survival. I'll even guide them to the Sword of Zariel. However," Raphael closed an open fist. "After they have done their heroic deeds, they must return the Sword to me. I would hate to lose so many potential clients to Zariel's plan, and I have grown rather fond of Baldur's Gate as of late."

Korilla held back a comment about how Raphael had grown rather fond of those types of contracts. It was how they collected most of the items in the House of Hope. "In that case, you'd best hear what's transpired at your father's infernal vault. We may not have to worry about Zariel in the near future..."

Raphael turned to face Korilla fully, his eyes wide with surprise. "The infernal vault? This should be interesting. Do tell."

"The Chosen of Bane and the Chosen of Bhaal snuck into the infernal vault and stole the Crown of Karsus." Korilla couldn't help but chuckle at the fact. "Mere mortals! The Crown hasn't been moved for over a millennium, but now it's in mortal hands."

"In other words... Now is the prime time to take it into our own hands." Raphael's grin grew wider. "I have been waiting for this moment for over a millennium. Time and time again, I have told my father that the Crown shouldn't be rotting away in an infernal vault, and yet, he would not listen. Tell me more about these mortals. What do they plan on doing with it? One could take on the Nine Hells with such an artefact."

"The Chosen of the Dead Three scheme to put the Crown on an elder brain," she explained, "From what I can gather, they plan on using mind flayer tadpoles and the elder brain to start a cult called the Absolute. Those infected by the tadpoles will hear the voice of the elder brain and believe it to be a god. By using three Netherstones, the Chosen can command the elder brain to do as they say—or rather, what their god wants."

"The Dead Three never do learn, do they?" Raphael remarked as

he placed a hand on his chin. "I need to know more. There will be those who rise against them, but currently, they don't stand a chance. Report back to me once you've discovered more details about their plan. I want to know all of the facts before taking action. I won't have my one chance squandered by poor planning. Do you understand?"

Korilla nodded. "Of course. I'll keep my eye out and find out as much as I can. We have time—their plan is only in the foundation stages. There's a lot to do before they can come close to completing it. Not even Hope can save the Crown from your inevitable clutches."

As Korilla turned to leave, Raphael looked back at Elturel once more. The legions of devils joining Zariel's fight would soon be all for nothing. Once he had the Crown of Karsus, nothing could stop him from taking on the Nine Hells, including his father. The bards would sing a song of Raphael, the one who united the Nine Hells.

But why stop there? He had always enjoyed the view of the sea from Baldur's Gate. The options were limitless, and so was his ambition. He couldn't wait to tell Hope about all of this later. Perhaps this would be the thing that would finally break her.

CLARA
KAY

With the People I Love Most

Written by Jen

TAGS | General Audiences Rating, Post-Game, Shadowheart's Personal Quest Spoilers, Shadowheart/Nocturne, Shadowheart, Mentions of Religious Trauma

"You were so mischievous, Shadowheart," Emmeline laughed as she sipped at the tea that Shadowheart made for her. "I remember the time you snuck two frogs into our home because you were enamored…"

Shadowheart was listening to her mother as she shared another memory from her childhood that she no longer remembered. A smile played at her lips, seeing how happy Emmeline was as she talked about these moments. Where in the past, she knew her missing childhood was something that left a sour taste in her mouth, now, being able to hear it from their perspective… Everything was okay.

Or as okay as it could be.

Her parents could fill in as many gaps as possible, and she knew they loved to tell these stories. Her mother seemed a little more coherent nowadays, and perhaps it was her remembering all the things that a young Shadowheart got up to all those years ago that helped bring some of her mind back at her age.

But there was still so much of her life that was lost.

She had been devoted to Shar for so long, and almost all of that time was lost to the mirror and to Shar's twisted grasp.

The only person she knew that would know anything about her past was Nocturne and the last she had heard, she was still worshiping Shar and unable to leave. She knew a few things like her mouse, Nibbles, and the story of the scar on her arm… but little more, and it wasn't like

she was willing to share those stories with her parents so they could know a little more about her time growing up.

They weren't her stories to share.

"Are you okay, Shadowheart? You seem eons away," Her mother's voice shook her out of her reverie and she realized she had been silent and staring off for far too long.

She heard a whimper and looked down at Buttons, who was headbutting her hand. She scratched behind his ears before looking up at her mother once again.

"Sorry, just got a bit lost in thought," She looked over at her. "I love hearing yours and father's stories about me growing up, I just… wish I could share something so you could know about the rest of my life."

"It's okay, we understand." Emmeline smiled at her, but Shadowheart could see the sadness behind it. She understood, there were so many years that they had lost to be together as a family.

She hated it too.

"I'm home," Arnell's voice rang out from the front door and Shadowheart immediately stood, trying to shake off her thoughts. She knew her father could handle bringing in everything he picked up, but she always wanted to check to see if he needed a hand regardless. "And I brought a guest who wished to see you, Shadowheart."

A guest? Shadowheart tried to think of her friends, who could be near to their farm to drop by for a visit. Gale was still in Waterdeep, as it was in the middle of the school year. Astarion wouldn't be out this early in the day, and either way, last she heard he was still in Baldur's Gate. Minsc and Jaheira were also in the city. Lae'zel hadn't sent word of being on the Material Plane again, and Shadowheart was certain (and hoped) that she would.

"Is it Wyll or Karlach?" Shadowheart began to walk towards the entryway. "I know from their letters that they were close to getting

Karlach's new…"

Her words died off as she saw exactly who was standing at the door, holding a crate of fruit that her father had picked up from the market.

"Nocturne?"

"Hi, Shadowheart." Nocturne hadn't changed at all since the day that Shadowheart had freed her parents, the last time she had seen her. "It's been some time, hasn't it?"

Emmeline had followed her daughter into the adjoining room, and smiled with realization. It didn't take long for her to gesture to Arnell to leave the two of them alone to catch up.

"I… What are you doing here?" Shadowheart couldn't deny that she was relieved, happy even, to see Nocturne here but she thought she'd never see her again. Few turned their back on Shar and lived to tell the tale.

Not that she assumed that Nocturne wouldn't.

"I managed to turn away from L-… our former goddess." Shadowheart tilted her head. She supposed it would be hard for Nocturne to even utter the name. Shar hadn't betrayed her, hadn't lied to her. Hadn't basically punished her for just existing.

Not like she had Shadowheart.

"I'm proud of you," Shadowheart waited for Nocturne to set the crate of fruit down before she wrapped her oldest friend in a hug, an action that not too long ago would have felt so out of character.

Perhaps Karlach had been rubbing off on her, even just through their periodic correspondence.

"What are you thinking of doing now?" Shadowheart found herself asking.

"I don't know. I'm not sure of many places that might have a need for a former quartermaster." Nocturne's cheeks flushed and Shadowheart

felt her heart fumble in her chest. She had forgotten (of course she had) how cute Nocturne could be. "But your father has offered me a place to stay, should you be okay with it."

Nocturne would be living here with her? Shadowheart felt her brow furrow as she thought about it. Of course she would be ecstatic to have Nocturne living with her. She understood that feeling of not knowing. She just got lucky, she supposed, that she was in the middle of a life or death situation and didn't really have a chance to process everything that happened with her former goddess.

But even now, there were things she struggled with.

"Maybe we can figure out what to do together?" Shadowheart offered, fidgeting with her hair. "I know I'm still trying to figure out what to do with my life now that I'm free from Shar. Maybe it can be something we both work on." She didn't tell Nocturne that she hadn't had a lot of time to think about it because she went from the tadpoles to helping her parents get settled in and raising the animals.

But who was she outside of that?

"You used to fidget with your hair when you were nervous back then too," Nocturne smiled at her. "I'm glad some things haven't changed."

"Yeah…" Shadowheart trailed off for a moment. "I'm glad you're going to be living here with us, Nocturne. It'll be just like old times. Or at least, however much old times could exist when we don't have Mother Superior breathing down our necks."

Nocturne laughed, and Shadowheart's heart fluttered again. Her body seemed to remember Nocturne, even if she lacked much of the memories that came of their time together. Shadowheart needed to heal still, as did Nocturne, but the future seemed brighter with Nocturne at her side.

"I hate to interrupt you two," Arnell poked his head into the

doorway where the two of them were still standing. “But Emmeline has made lunch if you would like to join us. I’d love to hear a bit more about you and our daughter, Nocturne.”

“O-oh, yes sir, we’ll be right in.” Nocturne looked over at Shadowheart with a bit of a startled expression. She seemed to be caught completely off guard by this, and Shadowheart just laughed.

She slipped her hand into Nocturne’s, humming softly at the familiar feel of it. It felt right to be holding her hand, and leading her into the dining room to share food with her parents. “No need to be nervous, my father is a gentle man. I promise it will all be fine.” She lifted Nocturne’s hand to her lips to offer a balm of sorts, and it seemed to work as Nocturne’s body relaxed just a little bit.

Perhaps a younger Shadowheart wouldn’t have even thought about imagining a moment like this, but this Shadowheart knew that she was exactly where she wanted to be.

No, needed to be.

Shadowheart was safe, and with Nocturne by her side, along with her parents. Her memories were gone, but she could make new ones with her parents, her friends, and with Nocturne. And Nocturne should be able to fill in the gaps.

Though perhaps, some things would be better left forgotten.

Shadowheart settled down at the table and even though for a moment she felt the wound flare up, she didn’t wince or hiss in pain. She had her loved ones around her, and that was the perfect balm for the pain. Shar could be petty, and try to ruin her life, but the love in the room was the perfect salve for this.

Shadowheart couldn’t have wished for anything more.

What A Night It Is

Written by RiotBeanzz

TAGS | Teen Audiences Rating, Canon Compliant, Act I Spoilers, Wyll Ravengard, All Origin Characters Mentioned, Mizora Mentioned, Angst, Character Study, Trauma Exploration

The Blade of Frontiers was neither cheat nor thief, yet stolen wine slipped smoothly down his throat to calm the storm raging inside him. For a moment, at least. He, the Blade, watched as the campfire flickered and danced, throwing shadows this way and that, offering sweet warmth as the day's light slowly slipped away. His newfound traveling companions mingled amicably in the firelight. The wizard cooked whatever odds and ends the group had managed to scrounge up between battles, eyes glinting as he chatted with the Githyanki warrior. Questions came easy to him, it seemed. The strange, pale elf watched the pair from some distance away, an unfunny comment no doubt resting on his tongue, longing to be let loose.

Wyll took a generous sip of his wine as his gaze settled on her, the one he was meant to kill, the one he could not help but save. Her single horn shone preternaturally. She sat with the dark-haired cleric, laughing at something whispered between them, her motions larger than life. They all fit together so *easily.* Wyll's head throbbed, pain shooting from behind his stone eye. Even now, as the truth wormed its way through his mind, he could not help but listen to old infernal whispers. *Advocatus diaboli.*

Hellfire swallowed him. One moment he was in camp, the next he was chasing her through Avernus, eye trained on that single curved horn. His chest tightened, the smell of smoke and smoldering sin still so

fresh in his mind. Bile rose in his throat, the heat of memory thrumming through his body; he tasted the hot iron of the Blood War, of her battleax, and he felt his body react in kind. A desperate sort of power bubbled inside him, the kind of power borrowed from devils, devils like his so-called patron. The kind of power he wanted so badly to wield against her and everyone like her. Wyll felt his fingers tightening around the hilt of his rapier where it hung at his side, though later he would not remember reaching for it.

A firm hand clapped him on the shoulder and Wyll found himself slammed back into the present. He stiffened. *Hells. What was that?* He glanced around, burying every horrible memory as best he could, praying to every god in every pantheon he could think of that his horrid little parasite hadn't shared that funny little moment with his traveling companions. *Perhaps it was the wine? Yes, yes, of course. That explains it.*

The elf, Astarion, grinned roguishly. "Dinner, darling?" He stood too close, voice overly familiar and dripping with insincerity. Astarion kept his grip on Wyll's shoulder, gesturing over to where the rest of the party sat enjoying their meal. Karlach waved. For a moment, Wyll considered bolting, but The Blade was no coward. A chill ran through him despite the night's warm atmosphere.

"Ah, of course," he asserted, a kind of moroseness creeping in around the edges of his words. If his compatriot noticed, he made no show of it.

The others were welcoming enough, beckoning him over, yet the chill remained. Wyll tried to tamp it down, smiling as he accepted a hearty serving from Gale; the man was more than just a master of the Weave, his ability to turn days-old fish and half-rotten vegetables into anything edible almost more impressive than his magic. The meal may have once been rotten, but now its taste was sweet and fresh, and the

flavors soon transformed Wyll's forced smile into something genuine. His guard slipped and, for just a moment, The Blade felt a little more like himself.

Wyll went for a cautious sip of wine — his desire for its comforting, full-bodied flavor outweighed any anxiety over less desirable side effects — and caught his own eye reflected on its inky surface. He saw its new infernal glint, the new dark pools of his sclera, and the new growths which sprouted just above his brow. What confidence remained wavered. His pulse thrummed in his ears. His vision blurred. At that moment, Wyll wished he might drown in his drink.

There were many times in the last seven or so years that Wyll found himself missing home, missing his father and his city's familiar walls. Tonight was by far the most potent. He wanted nothing more than to return home, to once again beg forgiveness, and for once be met with grace instead of cruelty. *Understandable cruelty,* Wyll corrected himself, trying to justify his father's decision for the thousandth time. More than anything, he wished to see his father again, to once again deserve his respect and admiration. All the love he'd ever felt and ever craved welled up inside him, so strong and unexpected he almost cried out then and there. But how could his father ever forgive him now, when even his face was no longer his own? A shudder ran through him. That hideous creature, Mizora. What hadn't she taken from him?

He could hear laughter from somewhere to his left, could feel the warmth of the campfire, could taste the wine he must have savored still on his tongue, but he felt in that moment as though he were lifetimes away. *I am a fool at best and a traitor at worst.* The thought bubbled to the top of his consciousness. An old thought, though it still stung like a fresh wound in salt. *And my father suffers neither. How could anyone else?* Wyll blinked slowly, deliberately, sheathing his sorrow like the experienced swordsman that he was. He focused again on the people

around him, those other unfortunates ensnared by the tadpole. How long would this uneasy alliance last? Doubtfully long, he was sure, especially now that they'd seen what he really is: curving horns, single devilish eye, his exterior matching whatever wretched wreck was left of his heart and soul. Surely, they'd turn on him soon. They'd be fools not to.

In an effort to center himself, Wyll took a slow bite of his dinner, encouraged himself to bask for a moment in the act. If he focused on each small movement, it was manageable. The flavors were nostalgic; somehow, it was like dining with his father as a child, despite the vast differences in time, place, and company. He let the sensation wash over him, bathing his companions in a new light. Even if they were to betray him — would it be betrayal, to slay he who would have slain an innocent at the behest of a devil? — tonight they were equals, perhaps even friends. He'd been an heir to one and a hero to many, but how many had he genuinely called *friend?*

As if reading his thoughts, and by the gods he hoped she hadn't, Karlach turned to Wyll. He saw her lips move, her face twisted slightly with concern, but he couldn't make out what she said.

"Sorry, ah, lost in thought, I suppose. Mind repeating yourself?"

"I said, are you okay, soldier?" Karlach repeated. The concerned look on her face deepened.

It was the first time in many years someone had asked him that, at least without the hint of mockery he'd grown so used to hearing from Mizora. How could he ever answer that? What do you say to that question, "are you okay?" The Coast still needed its Blade of Frontiers, its protector, yet the Blade found himself with bloodied hands and a blurry mind. While The Blade looked out for the Sword Coast, who looked out for Wyll Ravengard?

Ah, I'm doing it again. Playing Mr. Serious at an otherwise cheerful dinner, Wyll thought, straightening up with the realization. Still, Wyll's

heart and head felt heavy with a thousand different answers, heavy like the stone his eye was carved from, the uncertainty weighing him down. He felt ruined, but he smiled, just as he always smiled. “Merely enjoying the meal; what could be better than a night spent with good friends and good food? And what a night it is!”

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